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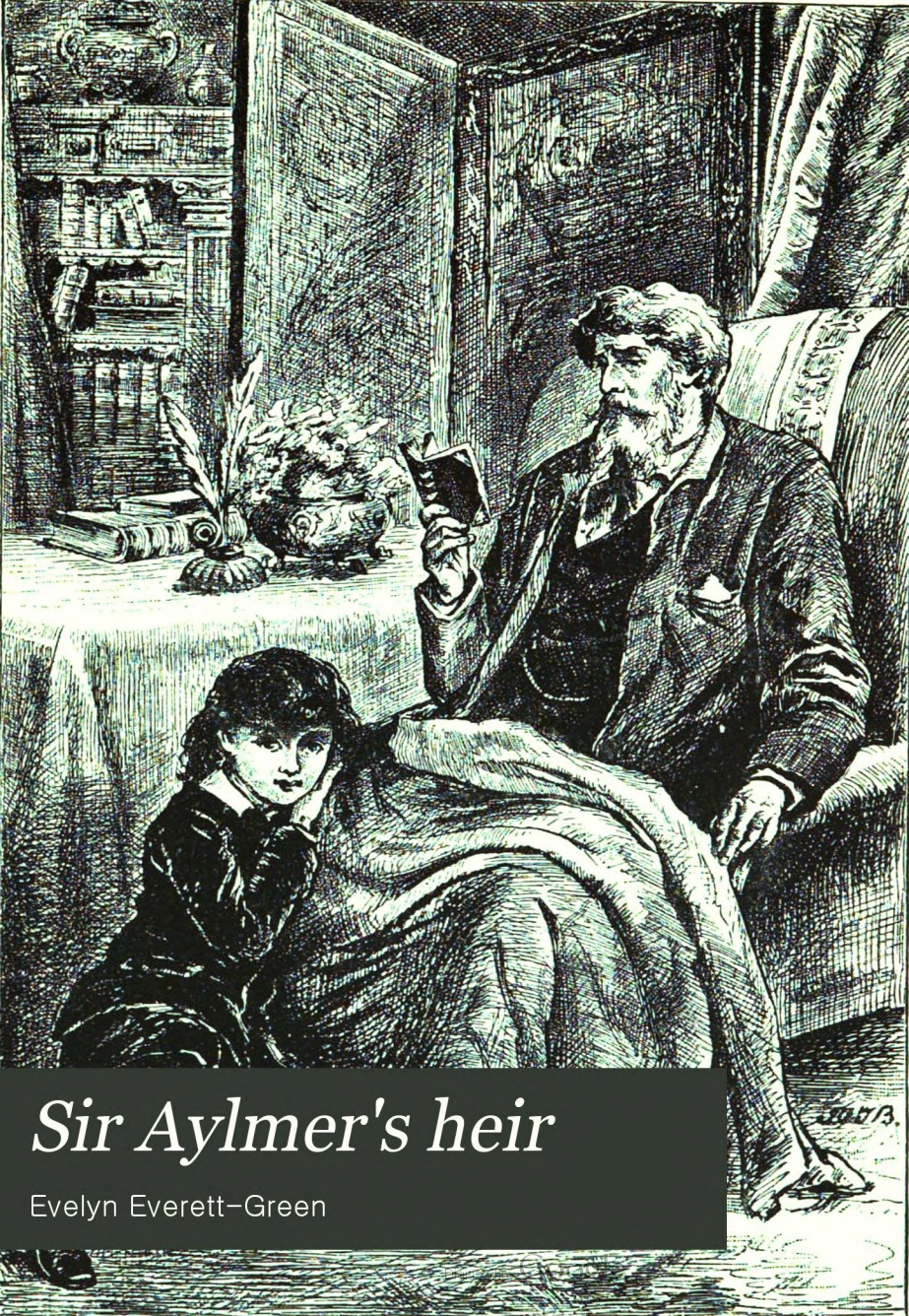

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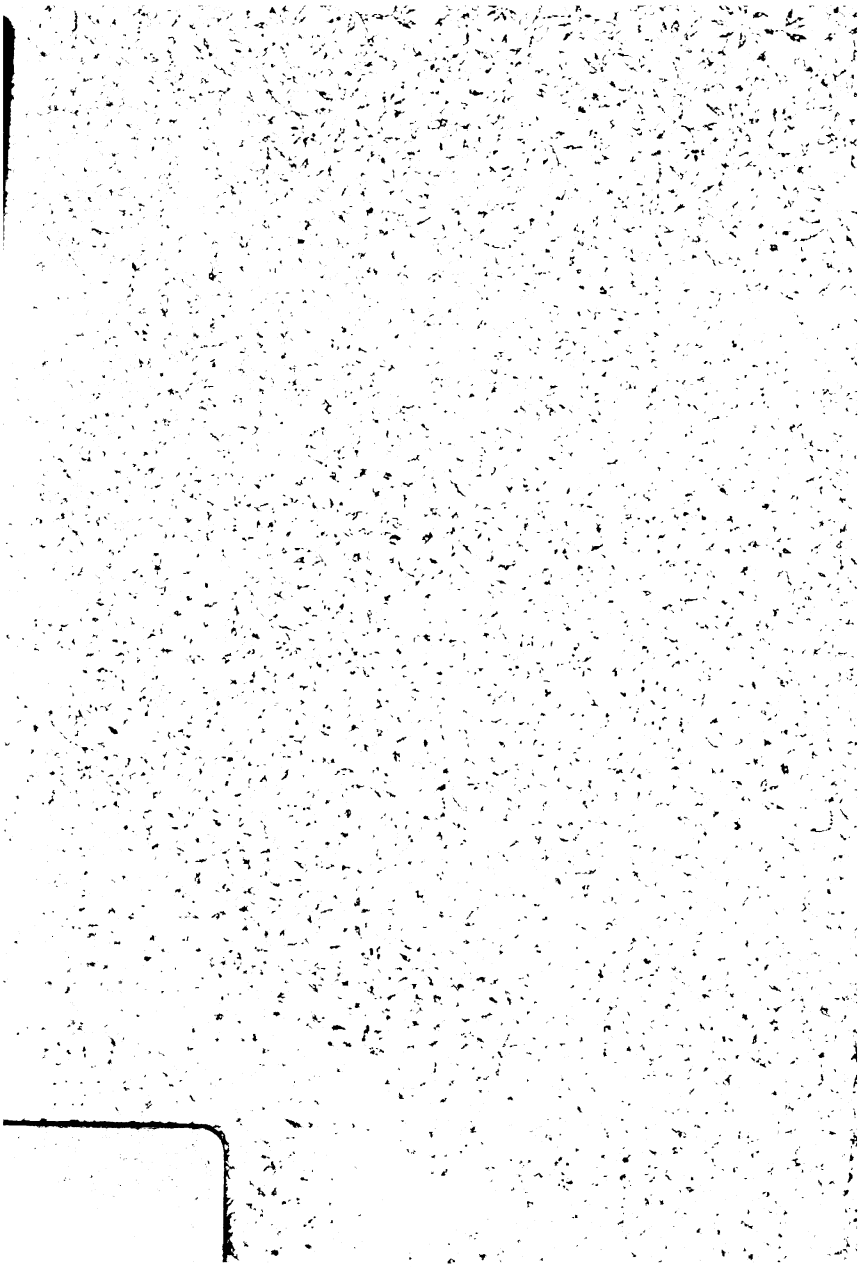
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SIR AYLMER'S HEIR

A TALE FOR BOYS

"He gazed upon the sweet painted face."

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SIR AYLMER'S HEIR

A Story for the Young

BY

Evelyn Everett-Green

Author of "Fighting the Good Fight," "Dulcie's Little Brother,"
"Temple's Trial," "The Heiress of Wylmington,"
"Winning the Victory,"
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SIR AYLMER'S HEIR.

I.

A LITTLE TRAVELLER.

"I MUST be brave—I will be brave!"

Again and again were these words repeated by a dark-eyed little boy, who was seated in the corner of a second-class railway carriage. His wistful gaze was fixed upon the mist-blurred, flying landscape, and his hands were closely locked together, as if the child had nothing else to cling to.

He was quite alone in the carriage. The cheerless November day seemed to have tempted abroad but few passengers. It certainly was not pleasant weather for travelling; and to the little boy, fresh from the blue skies and golden sunshine of Gibraltar, everything in this strange, new land seemed inexpressibly dreary.

Yet there were no tears in the large, liquid, hazel eyes, and the child's face, if sorrowful, was quietly

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resolute in expression. From time to time the lips moved in the repetition of words indelibly stamped upon the boy's brain during the parting interview with his father, now a week old; and the vibration of the train took up the familiar resolve, and as the great locomotive steamed onward through mist and rain, it seemed to say with ceaseless iteration,—

"I must be brave—I will be brave!"

Little Eyton Desborough listened to this inarticulate voice, till the monotony of the untiring repetition made him almost drowsy. Dreamily his mind wandered back to the days preceding his sudden journey to England—to the counsel and advice he had received from the lips of his loving and only surviving parent. For Eyton had lost his mother six months ago, and now he had to leave his father, who was called away to fight for his country's honour in a far-off land.

And now the great, throbbing engine had changed its tune, and was saying with equal energy and persistence,—

"He that overcometh—to him that overcometh—to him that overcometh will I give—"

It never got any further, and Eyton, though he pressed his hand hard over his eyes in the effort to recollect, could not recall the words of the promise. But he knew that his father had spoken much of the duty of being brave and of overcoming, and that he

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had all the places marked in the little Bible packed away at the bottom of his box.

The daylight was slowly waning, and the evening was closing in with a thick, heavy rain. It had been a long, weary day for little Eyton; and although the voyage from Gibraltar to the London Docks had given him a great idea of the size of the world, he began to think that England was a much larger country than any map would lead one to suppose. He had been put into the train quite early in the morning, and now at nightfall he had not reached the end of his journey, though from what he had been told he did not think he could have much further to go.

And in effect, just as the last of the daylight faded, the train began to slacken speed, and finally pulled up at a little wayside station, the name of which, however, was quite indistinguishable in the gloom.

Eyton, however, was travelling under the care of the guard, and in a few moments he found himself standing upon the wet, shining platform with his luggage beside him, whilst the train that had brought him was steaming away in the misty distance.

The child looked round him with a feeling of lonely helplessness, but there was no one in sight save the railway porters. He recalled his father's parting words:—

"I hope you will be made welcome, my child; but

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you must not expect too much. Your uncle and I have seen hardly anything of each other for years. I do not even know if he is at home himself or not; but he has written saying that you can remain at his house for a few months, until I can return home and make personal arrangements for your future. Meantime, you must be brave and independent, and make the best of your loneliness. It will not last long."

That promise the child hugged to his heart as the one bright thought for the future; but the present was terribly lonely. The burly station-master had by this time approached, and drawing him under the shelter of the projecting wooden roof, asked him with a kind of gruff kindliness of his business and destination.

"I am Eyton Desborough," answered the child. "I am to go to my uncle's house—my uncle is Sir Aylmer Desborough—and stay there till my father can come and fetch me. My father is a soldier, and has gone to Egypt to fight; but he is going to come back as soon as he can. Please, can you tell me how to get to my uncle's house? I have got money. I can pay for a cart or a carriage."

Eyton spoke with a quiet independence that showed a good deal of natural resolution. He betrayed none of the inward desolation of his soul. In fact he was afraid even to contemplate it himself, lest he should become unmanned. He did not want to think of anything but the exigencies of the moment.

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The station-master scratched his head in thoughtful perplexity.

"Desborough Court is all shut up. Sir Aylmer hasn't been home these three years or more."

Eyton's heart sank within him.

"Does nobody live there then?"

"No; leastways nobody but Mrs. Mansfield the housekeeper, and a bit of a girl, and a lad to job about the gardens. 'Tain't fit for gentry. All the place is shut up."

"My uncle said I might live there. I think I had better go there. There isn't any other place to go to. Won't he have told the housekeeper that I'm coming?"

"There's no knowing what Sir Aylmer may have done or not done. He's the most *onaccountable* gentleman in the country-side. Like enough, he's never said a word about it."

"A telegram came for Mrs. Mansfield nigh about two hours ago. We'd a job to find a horse to send it up to the house. Maybe it was to say summat 'bout the young gen'leman."

One of the porters volunteered this piece of information, and the station-master, leaving Eyton where he was, went off to make inquiries. The child stood quite still, counting the drops that plashed down from the open roof above him, and trying to follow the course of the cold steel lines as they ran on and on into the murky darkness. He did not want to think about himself or his loneliness. He tried to

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follow in idea the course of that great, strong engine, as it rushed on and on through the gathering night, leaving a fiery trail behind it. How did it find its way in the darkness over that narrow track? What would happen if it lost its way, or if it met another monster like itself flying through the air? Eyton was so much interested in this speculation that he had not time to grow impatient; nor did he know that the friendly station-master had been some time absent before he returned with comforting intelligence.

"Come along, young master; I expect it's all right. Some kind of a message went up to the house about you this afternoon, so no doubt you'll be expected. And by good luck there's an empty waggon going back to Dyson's mill, and the man says he'll take you and your luggage for three and sixpence—that's sixpence a mile, you know—and put you down at the very door. So come along now, as he don't want to wait; and it's a long way you've got to jog along. Have you any supper with you?"

Eyton held up a packet of sandwiches, which he had not as yet found appetite to eat.

"Ah, that's all right then. You won't starve on the way."

And the next moment the child felt himself lifted into a big waggon, and comfortably settled amid empty flour sacks and straw.

It was a strange ending to a strange day, that long jolting ride along pitchy-dark country roads; but the

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little boy dozed in his warm and cosy nook, and liked it better than the monotony of the train.

In thought he was back in the sunny home of his childhood. His mother's arms were round him; his head rested upon her shoulder. The music of her voice was in his ears; he was in an Elysium of happy dreamland, when suddenly a cessation of sound and movement awakened him to the stern realities of life.

He rose from his nest somewhat cramped in body and bewildered in mind, and pulling aside the canvas covering that blocked his view in front, he proceeded to gaze out into the dripping night, to find out what was going on.

He could distinguish the dim outline of some building much surrounded (as he fancied) by trees. A door was open a little way to the left, and he heard the sound of a woman's voice, raised as if in protest against something or somebody. From time to time another voice, probably that of the miller's man, threw in a word or so in a deprecating kind of way, generally evoking an additionally wrathful retort.

Eyton listened dreamily to the altercation, not at all aware that it referred in any way to him; when suddenly the carter returned, and commenced carrying his luggage from the waggon in at the open door.

"Come along now, young gen'leman," he said at last. "This be Desborough Court—Sir Aylmer's

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place—and it's time my 'osses were at home;" and lifting the boy bodily in his arms, he carried him a few paces along a flagged path, and deposited him within the door of the house.

The light in the wide stone-flagged passage was anything but brilliant, yet it was such a change from the gloom outside that for a few seconds the child's eyes were completely dazzled. When he began to take in his surroundings, the rumbling of the waggon-wheels had died away in the distance, and the door was being locked and bolted in a very decided manner by a tall and rather gaunt woman, dressed in rusty black, with a black cap upon her head.

An open door, opposite to that just closed, gave a glimpse into a pleasant fire-lit kitchen; and it was into this kitchen that Eyton was ushered by the housekeeper as soon as she had made fast the outer door.

"Well, this is a nice trick to play a body," were her first words, as she and the little intruder stood face to face; and something in the manner of his reception so overcame the poor lonely child that great tears welled up in his eyes, and he could barely command his voice to say, "I'm very sorry," before he broke down altogether.

Mrs. Mansfield, the housekeeper, justly considered that she had some ground for complaint; but though a sharp-spoken she was not a hard-hearted woman, and the sight of the boy's bravely-suppressed agitation conquered her at once.

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"There, there, my dear, don't cry, don't cry. It isn't your fault. Nobody would be silly enough to be vexed with you. It's the master's fault; there never was a gentleman so careless and ill-considerate as he. I think he'd sooner pay ten pounds down than write a letter; and them nasty telegrams never tell a body nothing, and only put one in a fluster. He must have known for weeks that you were to be sent here, and only to-day comes a few words on a bit of flimsy paper—written in pencil too!—to say a boy is coming, and is to be housed till further notice. Not a word as to who he is, or when he's coming—just like Sir Aylmer that is. I never knew such a man in all my days—never!"

Eyton listened to this tirade half-frighted at the *brusquerie* of the housekeeper's manner, half-reassured by feeling that her displeasure was not directed against him.

"Sir Aylmer is my uncle," remarked Eyton at the first pause; whereupon the housekeeper held up her hands as if in amazement, looked at him very closely, and exclaimed,—

"My gracious!"

"Are you surprised?" asked the child. "Did you think it would be somebody else? Does he often send little boys here to stay?"

Mrs. Mansfield was regarding him with undisguised curiosity.

"Then you are Captain Desborough's son!" she ex-

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claimed at length. "To think of your coming home like this! Well, I never!"

"This is not my home," answered the child gravely. "My father will soon come and take me somewhere else. It is only because the regiment had to move on such short notice that he sent me here. He had so much to do, and no time to make inquiries about schools. I wish I could have gone with him," concluded Eyton wistfully. "I like being with the regiment better than anything else."

Mrs. Mansfield's manner had undergone a decided change during the last few moments; the irritation and sense of injury seemed quite to have subsided, and she appeared interested and almost excited.

"What is your name, my dear—your Christian name?"

"Eyton."

The sound of the name produced an effect upon the woman that the child did not in the least understand. She threw up her hands, and uttered a subdued exclamation which he could not quite catch, but which sounded like "That name! that name!"

"It was my mother's name," explained Eyton gravely; "she was Miss Eyton before my father married her."

"Yes, I know, I know," was the hurried answer. "Well, Master Eyton, my dear, there is no call you should stay in the kitchen. I haven't got a proper room ready for you, seeing as you have come so

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unexpected-like. But there's a nice warm fire in my pantry; and I'll get you a bit of supper, and make you up a bed there for to-night, and to-morrow we'll turn to and get the nurseries ready for you. But, bless me, it'll be but a dull life you'll lead here!"

So the child was conducted out into the flagged passage again, and up two or three little wooden stairs into a cosy room, half-pantry, half-parlour, which was Mrs. Mansfield's special sanctum, the kitchen being the living-room of Jane and Dick, her niece and nephew, who lived with her in the deserted house, and did a little to keep it from falling into utter neglect.

Eyton was growing so weary and sleepy that he hardly heard what Mrs. Mansfield said as she bustled about to get him supper and bed. He found the cushions of the big, old arm-chair in which he had curled himself up very soft and comfortable, and a sense of confidence in the good-will of the mistress of the domain had brought with it much of comfort. He was almost asleep when he was roused by a sudden exclamation from Mrs. Mansfield, who had just entered with a covered dish in her hands.

"Bless me, child! how like you are to your father —not but what there's a deal of your mother in your eyes." The last words were added very low. "Many's the time he has sat curled up in that very chair, just as you are now. It seems to take me back twenty years and more to see you sitting there—that it do!"

Eyton roused up at these words, and also at the

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savoury odour of supper, for he was hungry after his long day of travelling.

"Did my father live here once?" he asked eagerly as he approached the table.

"Why, bless you, child, yes. Desborough Court was the only home he ever had till he went soldiering and got married. Didn't he tell you so himself?"

"No," answered Eyton, as he attacked the smoking ham and eggs. "He said it was my Uncle Aylmer's house. He hardly spoke a word about it. I didn't know he'd ever seen it. I wonder now why he didn't tell me."

The dark eyes were raised questioningly; but Mrs. Mansfield only pursed up her mouth and looked mysterious and a little disturbed.

The boy, however, was too tired to be curious, and did not pursue the inquiry. Yet it was a comfort to feel that this strange place had once been his father's home; and he sank to sleep between the lavender-scented sheets of his improvised bed, with more warmth at heart than had seemed possible earlier in the day.

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II.

THE OLD HOUSE.

WHEN Eyton opened his eyes next morning, they rested upon something so strange and unfamiliar that he was quite sure it must be part of a dream.

He was in an odd little parlour, as unlike an ordinary bedroom as it was to the tiny ship's cabin he had grown used to during the past week. Yet it was not the proportions or fittings of the room that first struck the child, but the second occupant of the place, who shared it silently with him.

This silent companion was none other than a huge dog of the blood-hound type, who was sitting solemnly upon his haunches, regarding the small intruder with a steady gaze of half-suspicious inquiry.

Eyton had a passion for animals, and as he lay still, watching this big creature, half afraid that if he moved the spell would break and the vision disappear, the remembrance of the events of last night came back to him, and he knew at last that he was not sleeping,

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and that his new companion must be one of the inmates of Desborough Court.

As he became aware of this he sat up in bed, and held out a small hand to the large dog.

The hound approached and snuffed the extended member, snuffed the child all over with a gravely critical air; and then, as if satisfied by the result of his inspection, deliberately raised his muzzle and licked Eyton's face with great good-will.

The little boy, delighted by this demonstration of affection, held the creature round the neck and hugged him ecstatically.

"Oh, you dear dog—you dear, dear dog! How I do love you! Do you live here? Will you be my friend? Oh, I do hope you will love me, and go about with me!"

The moment the child began to speak the dog showed signs of excitement and delight, which visibly increased as Eyton continued caressing and fondling him. He pushed his big nose up against the little boy's cheek with a whimper expressive of pleasure, and licked his face and hands with ever-increasing zeal and eagerness. And in the midst of these demonstrations in came the housekeeper.

"My gracious goodness, King! whatever are you doing here? Come away, sir, this minute—frightening the young gentleman like that!—Not frightened? Oh, that's well. I was afraid he would terrify you out of your senses. Dick didn't ought to have let

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him in to-day, seeing as there was a stranger on the place. Mostly he's that fierce with any one new; it's a mercy he didn't tear you to pieces!"

"He's quite friendly," answered Eyton proudly; "he likes me, I think. He's only licking."

"Well, for sure, if he isn't now! Just to think of it! It must be the old blood he recognizes. He comes of the old stock, he does. Them hounds have been with the Desboroughs for generations. King is twenty years old now. He knew your father well, and would follow him everywhere. He knows you for a chip of the old block, that he do, or he would never be so friendly-like."

"Oh, you dear, *dear* dog," cried Eyton, with another embrace, "I shall love you twice as much now.—Please, isn't it time for me to get up? And where shall I wash myself?"

"Oh, I'll bring you water and towels, and fresh clothes from your box. And we're getting the nurseries all ready for you, Master Eyton, my dear. You shall have your breakfast there when you're up. But I don't know what we're to do for a nurse for you. Neither me nor Jane is much in the way of young folks. You've always been used to a nurse, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, not for a long time," answered Eyton eagerly—"not since mamma died and nurse got ill and went back to England. I can dress myself and do everything except mend my clothes. I shouldn't like

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a nurse again at all. If I had any one, it should be an orderly, like papa's."

Mrs. Mansfield looked decidedly relieved at this piece of news, and bustled about, getting all that was requisite for the child to perform his independent toilet. King remained with him, and the exchange of mutual blandishments and confidences somewhat hindered matters, so that the hands of the kitchen clock pointed to eleven before the child found his way thither in search of his friend the housekeeper.

"I didn't know it was so late," exclaimed Eyton, somewhat aghast.

"Oh, you needn't mind that, child. You wanted your sleep out; I'm sure of that. And I'm thankful you did sleep so long. It gave us time to get the nurseries ready for you. We've been at it ever since five o'clock, all three of us, and have only just finished now. When rooms have stood empty this twelve years and more, they take a deal of putting to rights, I can tell you."

Eyton was rather overwhelmed by the commotion he was causing.

"I'm sorry you have had so much trouble," he said politely.

"Oh, never you mind about that. Time's no such great object here, as you'll soon find out for yourself. We don't mind a little trouble. It's a blessing for something of any kind to happen. One might as well be a Sleeping Beauty in the wood for all that one sees of folks about."

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Eyton looked gravely into the hard-featured face above him, wondering how Mrs. Mansfield would look dressed in white robes, with her hair hanging down, lying asleep on rose-coloured cushions, like little Eva Daubenay in the tableau of the Sleeping Beauty last Christmas. He came to the conclusion that he would rather play Prince to Eva, on the whole; and then his heart smote him for ingratitude, because Mrs. Mansfield had been very kind to him, whereas Eva had often slapped him, and called him a silly boy and other unflattering names.

"I was once the Prince to the Sleeping Beauty," he remarked after a pause; "she was asleep—at least she pretended to be—and I woke her up by a kiss. You're not asleep, but I'll kiss you too if you like," he added valiantly, "because I'm very much obliged to you, you know."

A softer look came over the gaunt woman's face—Eyton thought perhaps she *might* be beautiful after all, if she hadn't got that ugly thing on her head—as she bent to receive the proffered salute.

"Bless your little heart," she said; "you're the very image of your father.—Now what are you gaping and staring in that silly way for? Why aren't you at your scrubbing, pray?" The last words were so sharply spoken that Eyton fairly jumped.

He turned round to see a buxom, country girl, with red arms and a big, blue apron, standing in the doorway, eying the new-comer with undisguised curiosity.

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"How do you do?" said Eyton. "I'm sorry you had to get up so early all for me. I hope you're not very tired."

The girl turned very red and giggled, but Eyton thought she looked pleased.

"Does she live here too?" he asked of Mrs. Mansfield.

"Yes; Jane is my niece. She lives here with me; and her brother Dick, too. They came here when their father died, and have been here ever since."

"And where is Dick?" asked Eyton with interest. "I should like to see Dick."

"Oh, he'll be somewhere about the place. He's out of doors most days, doing this, that, and the other. You'll see him no doubt if you go round the garden presently; but come your way now to the nurseries. You'd best get your breakfast first, and then you can take a look about you."

So Eyton followed the housekeeper, and the dog followed him, and together they mounted a twisting wooden staircase which led to an upper floor, and passing through a door at the top, and turning down a long matted passage to the right, they reached a series of large, low, bare rooms that once had been the nurseries of the old house.

Eyton looked curiously in at the open doors as he passed, wondering what it would feel like to live in the midst of all that empty space. A little bit of last night's desolation began to creep over him; but it was

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considerably dissipated by the warmth and comfort of his own particular quarters.

"The north wing do be a bit gloomy, but I daren't put you nowhere else but in the nurseries without the master's express leave. Anyhow the end room has an east window and gets the morning sun beautiful; so we've got that for your living-room, and the bed-room opens out of it, so it'll be all handy for you. It's a good bit away from the kitchen, to be sure; but it won't seem so far when you're used to the place. And if you're a bit lonesome up here, you can come down to my parlour sometimes; and I daresay King will stop upstairs with you as much as you like, seeing as he's made such friends already."

"I shan't be half so lonely with him," said the child. "What a lovely fire! what a funny window! I never saw a house a bit like this."

"Well, get your breakfast now, and then you can wander about anywhere you like. The rooms aren't locked up, though the shutters are shut on the south side, where the sun comes in so strong. You must amuse yourself as best you can—I'm sure I don't know what you'll find to do all day. And don't get into more mischief than you can help."

With which caution Mrs. Mansfield withdrew, leaving Eyton alone to his poached egg and bread and milk, which he discussed in somewhat picnicing fashion, taking stock of his quarters as he did so.

He liked the look of his new room, it was so queer

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and old. For one thing, it was exceedingly low, and the ceiling was crossed by heavy rafters of oak quite black with age. The mantel-piece was also black; and the fire-place was large, with a funny wide chimney, up which a huge fire of pine logs was crackling gloriously, flooding the rather sombre room with ruddy light. The window was very odd indeed, very long and low, and divided by stone mullions into twelve little divisions. A wide, low seat ran all along underneath, and kneeling upon this the child could see out over the wide expanse of park-land and moor, which stretched right away as far as eye could reach. Immediately below there seemed to be shrubberies and some weedy, overgrown garden. The outlook on a gloomy November morning was not very cheerful; but it was all new to Eyton, and therefore not devoid of charm. He turned back to the room and examined it more closely.

There was an ancient rocking-horse in one corner, which had lost every vestige of paint; and there were some old-fashioned battered books and toys in a big oak press that faced the window. A soft old Persian carpet devoid of pattern covered the floor, and an old sofa, a table, and a few uncompromising-looking chairs completed the furniture. The bed-room adjoining was yet more dark, for it had no fire and only a north window. The bed was a heavy four-poster, and the furniture was dark and cumbrous—all of oak almost as black as ebony.

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The little boy's boxes had been unpacked, and his clothes and other possessions ranged in drawers and shelves, but they made but a small show in the surrounding emptiness; and Eyton could not help sighing for a brother to share his loneliness and his vast territory in this strange old house.

King's company, however, was very consolatory. He was so big that he really helped to fill the vacant space; and his red-brown eyes were so eloquent of meaning that it was almost as good as if he could talk.

"Shall we go round the house?" asked Eyton presently. "I suppose we must amuse ourselves, and not always be troubling Mrs. Mansfield. I should like to see the house where my papa lived. I'm so glad you knew him and were fond of him, you dear old dog! I wonder if you belonged to him, or if you are my Uncle Aylmer's."

King, however, could give no evidence on this point, but only wagged his tail and laid his cheek against his little master's. And with his hand over the dog's great neck, Eyton began a tour of the old-fashioned Tudor mansion.

I almost think that, but for his four-footed friend, he would have lost himself amongst the long corridors and intricate stairways and wilderness of dim, shut-up rooms. I am certain he would never have dared to wander so far away from his own private haunts. The great staircase and hall (which seemed to him as

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big as a church) fascinated him greatly; and he spent a long time in the minstrel's gallery that overlooked it. But of the rest of the house he only retained a very vague impression that day. He saw so much that he remembered little. It was more as if he were walking in a dream, going on and on and on through some visioned building, and never reaching the limit of its walls.

Presently he grew weary of the pilgrimage, of armour, pictures, tapestry, and panelling, and began to make his way back as well as he could to his own warm quarters. The rain was falling, so that he could not go out to look for Dick; and he began to feel awed by the sense of emptiness and loneliness that pervaded all the house.

He had got as far as the hall again, and was contemplating mounting the stairs to the gallery, from which place he felt sure he could find his way back to his own rooms, when the sight of an open door attracted his flitting fancy, and he thought he would go in and see what the room contained.

He pushed open the door, and for a moment stood perfectly still, as if he had received a sudden shock. The room was all dark, save where a single shaft of light pierced its way from a half-opened shutter, and fell upon the white draperies of a graceful female form; and the dark eyes—like Eyton's own—seemed looking full upon him.

With a sudden, sobbing cry of "Mother! mother!

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mother!" the child darted forward, and next moment found himself confronting a picture.

He stopped suddenly short, choking back the sobs, half of terror and half of joy, that the illusion had called up; and clinging to King, as if for protection, he gazed and gazed upon the sweet, painted face that seemed to be smiling down upon him.

"It's my mamma, King," he whispered; "my own dear mamma.—But why is her picture here in Uncle Aylmer's house? I'm sure papa told me he'd never seen Uncle Aylmer since he got married. I always fancied—I don't know why—that Uncle Aylmer did not like mamma."

Eyton spoke slowly, half aloud, trying to piece together what he had heard or fancied about his family history; but he found he knew too little to construct any theory, and he stole back to his own quarters, half mystified, half comforted by the knowledge that his mother's picture stood in the dim room below.

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III.

A PIECE OF FAMILY HISTORY.

ONE whole long, strange week passed away very much after the manner of the first day. Eyton spent his time for the most part in wandering over the old house which was now his home; and with the faithful hound for his companion, he was not exactly lonely or unhappy, but he grew more and more dreamy and silent with every day that passed.

He had by this time made acquaintance with Jane and Dick; but he did not find that they had much conversation, and Mrs. Mansfield was something of a martinet, and did not encourage him to come down-stairs much, or "gossip" with the under-servants.

The weather was persistently wet, so that he had not been able to get out of doors often, and there had been no church-going on Sunday, greatly to his disappointment.

He began to wonder vaguely what life would be like during the winter, and if he should ever have anything to do but wander up and down stairs and round and round deserted rooms. His departure had

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been so sudden that his father had had no time to give him instructions as to what he was to do with his time, and nobody here had any notion of setting him to work. Altogether everything was so strange that he hardly knew what to think of it all; and he knew that all communication with his father would be for the present very uncertain and very brief.

Eyton did not know, however, that his own doubts and perplexities were shared to a great extent by the worthy housekeeper; but so it was, as he was not long in finding out.

He spent his days mostly quite alone, either in his own nursery or in wandering about the house; but after he had had his tea, and it had grown quite dark, he often stole down the narrow wooden stairs, and made his way to Mrs. Mansfield's parlour, where she generally was to be found at this time, sometimes busy at needle-work, at others dozing in her chair over the fire.

She let the child sit with her if he seemed to wish it, although she was not always in a talking mood, and they generally spent a very quiet evening, few communications passing their lips. Still it was company, and Eyton preferred it to the loneliness of his nursery.

One evening as he descended as usual and entered the little parlour, he found Mrs. Mansfield with a blotting-case open before her, and a look of perplexity stamped upon her face. Anything that promised

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variety was acceptable to Eyton, and he advanced with a look of eager interest.

"Are you going to write a letter, Mrs. Mansfield?" he asked.

"Looks like it, don't it?" was the slightly snappish response; but Eyton was growing used to the housekeeper's sharpness of manner, and was not at all disconcerted.

He drew up a chair on the opposite side of the table, and leaned upon it with his elbows, with his chin in his hands.

"And whom are you going to write to?" he pursued. "And what are you going to say?"

"That's just what I don't know yet. It's no such easy thing to write to the master. But something's got to be settled one way or another, and write I must. Things can't go on for ever like this. It's out of all reason."

"What things?" asked Eyton with great interest. "I didn't know that anything was the matter except that the rain comes in through the roof in some places; but Dick says it always did and always will."

"Bless you, child, it isn't the roof that's the trouble. It's you that I'm a-worriting about."

"Me!" echoed Eyton in great surprise. "I hope I've not been naughty."

"No, no; it's not that. You don't give a bit more trouble than is natural, and it's not the trouble I grumble at. It's the whole thing I don't approve.

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It isn't the right thing for a young gentleman like you to live in this kind of fashion, getting no schooling, and no companionship, and no nothing. Your father when he sent you here never knew the kind of place Desborough Court had turned into, I'll be bound."

"No, I don't think he did," answered Eyton. "He never told me it would be so queer. I think he thought my uncle lived here, though he was often away. I *thought* he said so anyhow."

"Ay, ay, like enough. He remembered the old house as it was in his day—full of servants and guests, and nothing but comings and goings and hospitality from one year's end to the other. He didn't know how the master took it, and what a change it made in everything."

"Took what?" asked Eyton, keenly interested; "and why didn't papa know? I thought brothers always wrote to one another and were fond of each other. I don't understand about papa and Uncle Aylmer."

"No, no, child, and there's no call you should," was the hasty response. "There's a deal goes on in the world that children have no need to know about. Anyway, here you are, and here you've got to stay; and your father's out in the wars fighting, and can't see after you, and it's only right as some one should do it for him, and it's my bounden duty to let the master know."

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Eyton did not exactly know what there was to say, or what the difficulty was; but it was interesting to take a part in the discussion.

"So that's why you're going to write to him? May I stay and watch you? Do you often write letters to Uncle Aylmer?"

"No, not once in a twelvemonth. The steward writes him about the property; and there's never been any cause for me to trouble about writing before, save once or twice in a great while. I don't know as he'll answer even now, he's that queer in his ways; but I must do my duty."

"That's what papa always says—that people should always do their duty. And what are you going to say?"

"That's just what I've got to think. 'Tisn't easy writing a letter when one isn't used to it—least of all to the master."

"Let's do it together," suggested Eyton, leaning forward eagerly. "I used to watch papa writing his letters often. He generally begins, 'Dear Sir,' or 'Dear So-and-so.' I suppose you'll begin 'Dear Sir Aylmer,' won't you?"

"Bless you, no, child—that would be taking a liberty;" and taking up a sheet of paper, Mrs. Mansfield made a laborious start.

"'Honoured Sir,'" read Eyton as her pen moved over the paper. "How nice that looks! I shall always begin my letters like that, I think. Now, what are you going to say next?"

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"The young gentleman arrived quite safe about a week ago," said the housekeeper, after pausing to consider, and was preparing to write, when Eyton interrupted her.

"Don't you think you'd better put my name in instead of saying 'the young gentleman'? That might mean anybody; but if you said Eyton Desborough, there couldn't be any mistake."

The woman looked up half uneasily.

"You haven't any other Christian name besides Eyton, I suppose?"

"No."

"Well, then, I think I'll say 'Master Desborough, your nephew'—that will be best; and the housekeeper wrote on then for some time, whilst Eyton sat opposite, watching her, lost in thought.

There was a little discussion later on as to the spelling of various words and the construction of some of the sentences, and the epistle when finished stood thus:—

"HONOURED SIR,—Young Master Desborough, your nephew, arrived safely about a week ago. I have put him into the old nurseries, and done the best I can for him; but it isn't much of a house for a child to come to, and I want to know your wishes about his eddication, seeing as his father is away soldgering, and can't give instructions on the subject. It don't seem right for a young gentleman in his position to

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have no skooling all these months, and not a soul to speak to but servants. If you have any instructions to give on the subject, they shall receive prompt attention. Master Desborough sends his love to you, and desires me to say that he hopes you will soon come home. Your obedient servant,

"HANNAH MANSFIELD."

After this letter was folded and sealed, Eyton left the table and sat down on the floor in front of the fire, and took King's great head upon his knee. His face was very grave, and presently he looked up into the housekeeper's face and asked with apparent suddenness,—

"Why doesn't Uncle Aylmer like the name of Eyton? Is it because it was my mamma's name?"

Mrs. Mansfield got red and looked disturbed.

"I didn't say he didn't like it—did I, child? What ideas you do get hold of?"

Eyton looked steadily into the fire.

"If he doesn't like my mamma, why does he have a great big picture of her in his house?"

"I didn't know you'd found the picture. Did you know it? It was taken years and years ago."

"It's just like what she always was," said the child wistfully. "I thought it was she when I saw it first—my own sweet, pretty mother!"

Mrs. Mansfield made no reply, but Eyton glancing up at her thought he saw tears in her eyes.

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That gave him courage, and he got up and came and stood at her side.

"Please, will you tell me all about it? It is so miserable not understanding things. I don't know why you keep it from me. I'm quite old enough to understand."

The housekeeper hesitated and looked doubtful. In her heart of hearts she desired to speak, but she was half afraid.

"What would your father say to me, telling you things that he had kept from you?"

Eyton's glance grew very thoughtful and intent.

"I don't believe he'd mind. I'm almost sure he wouldn't—not now that I know there *is* something and it makes me worry. My papa and mamma didn't do anything *wrong*, did they?—or was it Uncle Aylmer?"

The perplexity and distress in the child's face touched the woman's heart; she pitied him in his loneliness and helplessness, and saw that openness would be the best.

"Why, no, Master Eyton, my dear. What fancies you do get into your head! Well, sit you down and I'll tell you all about it. It isn't anything for you to worry your little head about."

Eyton sat down on the floor again with a sigh of relief, and leaned his head against Mrs. Mansfield's knee.

"It was like this, you see, child. The Eytons lived

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not so many miles from this place, but spent most of their time in furren parts. Well, one year long ago, when your father was at one of them places where soldiers stay so much, the Eytons all come home, father and mother, two sons and a daughter—your mother, my dear, and one of the loveliest young ladies that ever lived, as I said from the first. Your uncle, Sir Aylmer, though he was ten years older than she was, fell in love with her from the first, and wanted to marry her; and as he was very rich, and the greatest man of the county, her parents urged her all they knew to say 'yes.'"

"But she didn't, did she?" asked the little boy quickly. "She couldn't, you know, because she married my papa."

"Yes; but she hadn't even seen your father then. He was away with his regiment, and didn't come home till some time after. Anyway, I don't think she cared much for Sir Aylmer—at least not as a husband. But she was very young, and her relations were always at her; and though she hadn't actually promised, folks talked as if the marriage would certainly take place. And the master had her portrait painted, and hung it up in his study; and nobody had a doubt but what there'd be a Lady Desborough here before long."

"And then? Don't stop, please."

"Why, then your father came home to see his brother—they had been such friends all their lives,

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although there was eight years between them—and he fell in love with Miss Eyton directly he saw her, and she fell in love with him. And though he had meant at first never to say a word, but to go away and let her marry his brother, yet when he found that she wasn't really engaged, and had never loved Sir Aylmer, and loved him, and only him, then he spoke out; and in the end they ran away and got married before any one knew."

"Oh, how nice!" cried Eyton, delighted. "Was Uncle Aylmer angry?"

"I don't know if angry is the right word for it quite. The Eytons were angry, and they cast her off, and never saw her again to the day of her death. As for the master, he took it all very quietly, but it made a complete breach between the brothers, and he's never been the same man since. He went away at once and travelled all the world over; and when he came back, it was only to see the house all shut up and go off again. He's not been near the place for years now, and sometimes I think he'll never come again; but what he will or won't do, nobody can tell."

"And has he never married anybody else?"

"No, never, and never will do; I'm pretty well certain of that."

"And does he live all alone?"

"Yes; at least he only has a servant with him, and spends his time travelling about."

"Is he unhappy?"

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"Why, child, how can I tell? He needn't lead that life if he didn't like it, so I suppose he must be pretty well content."

"And is he angry still with papa?"

"How can I tell? It looks as if they'd made it up, seeing as he was willing you should come here. But it's no good asking questions about the master, for there isn't a soul in the world can answer them."

Eyton sat very still for a long time.

"Poor Uncle Aylmer!" he said at length. "I think I should like him if I saw him. I wonder if he will ever come home."

Mrs. Mansfield shook her head and said nothing, and presently Eyton got up and went quietly to bed.

He took up his little Bible the last thing before he went to bed, and looked out some of the promises his father had talked to him about made to those who overcame.

"I wonder if Uncle Aylmer overcame," he speculated in his dreamy fashion. "I shall often think of him now. I wish I knew more about him."

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IV.

EDUCATION.

"DICK!"—"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever seen my Uncle Aylmer?"

"Why, bless you, yes, sir, many a time. I've been stable-boy here ever since I was twelve year old. Came as stable-boy, and then was groom; and now odd-job man, or anything you like to call it. I live here now to take care of my aunt like."

"And how long ago was it that you came first?"

Dick scratched his head and considered.

"Maybe a matter of fifteen years."

"Then you are twenty-seven now," remarked Eyton promptly, after a brief calculation.

"That be so, sir," answered Dick, looking gratified; "twenty-seven I was my last birthday."

"And your aunt calls you a boy. I used to think you were about fifteen. *I* don't think people are boys after they're fifteen. I think they are men then."

"Aunt never seems to think no one gets no older but herself," remarked Dick after a pause. And then there was silence for a while.

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The foregoing dialogue took place in the stable one day, when Dick was leisurely grooming down the old horse that ran soberly in the light cart to fetch supplies for the house from the distant town.

Eyton was seated cross-legged upon a disused corn-bin, and the blood-hound sat upright beside him. Dick had thrown a warm horse-rug over the child's shoulders, to keep away the cold. He was beginning to relish a bit of gossip with the young master, and to find the use of his tongue, which had grown rusty of late years.

After a considerable pause, Eyton began again, his mind going back to its original starting-point.

"I want to know what my Uncle Aylmer is like, Dick. Can't you tell me?"

Again Dick scratched his head. Description was not his strong point.

"I don't hardly know what to say to that. He was tall and thin, and had a way of looking right through you, like as if his eyes was a pair of corkscrews." Dick felt a pardonable pride in this sudden metaphorical inspiration. "The captain—that's your father, sir—he was always pleasant-like and easy in his ways, and would come and chat with us between whiles, like as you're chatting to me now. But the master, he never seemed to use two words where one would do, and just gave his orders short and straight, and never a word or a look to spare. He never had to speak twice, hadn't the master. Nobody ever

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dared forget what he'd said. Folks was always a bit afraid of him, even his own kind—so at least I allers heerd like. Well, I don't know as I can tell you no more; but there's his picter in the house—you'd better take a look at that."

"His picture! oh, where?" cried Eyton eagerly.

"Why, in the library, to be sure, where the picter of your poor ma stands."

"Is it Uncle Aylmer the tall dark man, with his hand on the back of a white horse and a whip in his other hand? Oh, I've looked so often at that picture! It reminded me just a very little of papa. But why has he got such a thin, sad face? It looks like somebody who has had such a lot of trouble."

"The master allers did have a melancholic look," answered Dick; "but I never heerd tell as there was any special reason for it."

"And why does my mother's picture stand on the floor and his hang up opposite? Did hers never hang up? It looks as if it had once, by the mark on the wall."

Dick looked a little sheepish as he rubbed vigorously at Dobbin's rough coat.

"You see, he ordered it down just afore he went away, and down it came; but he never gave no more orders about it, nor went into the room no more. So there it has stayed on the floor just as we put it, ever since. He always was a rum 'un, he were," added Dick after a pause, and Eyton rested his chin on his hand and looked very thoughtful.

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"Do you know, Dick, I feel *so* sorry for my uncle," he said presently. "I think about him a *great* deal more than I think about anybody else, even papa; because, you see, papa has his soldiers and his officer friends and all those people about him, and Uncle Aylmer is so very lonely. He's lonely, and I'm lonely, you see; perhaps that's why I feel as I do. I wish he would come home; perhaps we should be able to cheer each other up."

Dick cast a single quick glance, as if of amused curiosity, at the child, and said nothing.

"I know all about things now, Dick," pursued Eyton gravely. "It's because I know about it all that I'm so sorry for Uncle Aylmer, and want so much to see him and tell him so. There's one thing I don't quite understand about it, though."

"And what may that be, sir?" asked Dick respectfully, for he was beginning to have a great opinion of his youthful companion.

"I can't think why, when my papa and mamma married one another, they didn't both come and live here with Uncle Aylmer and keep him company; he was so fond of them both, you know, and it was only their running away that made him angry. If they had said they would always live with him, so that he mightn't be lonely, it would have been so much nicer for him."

Dick grinned to himself over his work, but prudently held his peace.

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"I suppose papa really knew best," pursued the child presently; "but it does seem to me that it would have been the best way. When he comes to fetch me, I'll ask him about it. We might live with Uncle Aylmer now, if he'd come home again and let us cheer him up."

"Why, so you might, sir, for sure."

"And, Dick, who are all the other pictures in the long gallery under my nurseries? Are they people who are alive still?"

"No, sir; them are family portraits. Lots of them are other Sir Aylmers—your grandfathers and great-grandfathers, you know, who lived here before you."

"I don't understand," said Eyton. "Are there more Sir Aylmers besides my uncle then?"

"Well, it's like this, you see, sir," answered Dick, flattered at being appealed to as an oracle, but rather puzzled how to express himself. "This house and the land for a mile or so round it always belongs to the baronet, and he's generally a Sir Aylmer—leastways it's been so for a many generations now. When the father dies, it goes to the eldest son, and he's always called after his father; so there have been half-a-dozen Sir Aylmers, one after the other, you see. They do say as the first of the Desborough baronets fought for the king whose head was cut off, better nor two hundred years ago; but I cannot rightly say how that may be."

"That was King Charles the First," answered Eyton.

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"I know a good deal about him. There was a civil war when he was king. Some day, if you like, I'll tell you all I know about it. But it's very interesting about all the Sir Aylmers. Will there always be baronets going on? and will they always be Sir Aylmers too?"

Dick looked a little perplexed himself as this idea was presented to him. It had not occurred to him before to look into the future.

"I hardly know how that is like to be," he answered slowly. "The master would be Sir Aylmer so long as he lives, for sure."

"Why, yes," answered Eyton thoughtfully; "of course I know that. But if he were to die, what then? He hasn't got an eldest son, has he?"

"No; he's never married, the master hasn't," answered Dick, shaking his head in some perplexity. Then an inspiration seemed to strike him, and he said, "Why, I know how 'twould be. I remember what they said when he was so ill years ago, and like to die. The captain, your father, would be baronet then; only he'd be called Sir Philip, not Sir Aylmer. And then," pursued Dick, kindling with his own cleverness, "you'd be the next to come, being your father's eldest son; and if he were to die, you'd be Sir Eyton, and all the Desborough property would belong to you."

Eyton sat very still, his eyes growing dreamy with all the new ideas crowding in upon him. Young as he was, he had a perception that wealth and import-

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ance entailed corresponding responsibilities. He could not understand exactly how he ever could become Sir Eyton and master of this house, nor weigh the probabilities of succession; but Dick had said that it might be, and certainly Dick must know.

And like the royal lady who rules our land as Queen, when she first realized her nearness to the throne, Eyton's first thought was to make himself worthy of the position he might one day be called upon to fill.

He was trying to recall some of his father's teaching, that was beginning to grow a little dim and vague.

"The greatest and noblest men in this world, Eyton, are those who labour most zealously for the good of others." That had been one of Captain Desborough's maxims. And another was,—

"Selfishness is at the root of much that is evil. People who live only for themselves, and do nothing to promote the welfare and happiness of others, can never be really happy or useful members of society. Even children can do something to try and bring more brightness and happiness into the lives of the people they come across. Never think you are too young to be useful, or to help other people. If you do, you will be certain to grow selfish and idle."

Eyton recalled this and several other pieces of advice of a similar character as he sat still and silent on the corn-bin. King, growing rather tired of his

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position, stepped down and stretched himself, and then laid his head affectionately upon Eyton's knee, whilst Dick got down the set of old harness he habitually used, and began leisurely to clean it.

"Dick," said the little boy suddenly, "is there anything I could do for you?"

Dick looked across at his young master and grinned.

"For me, sir? I don't think I quite take your meaning. It's for the likes of us to work for you. You're gentry, you see, and we're only working folks."

Eyton coloured to the roots of his hair in the effort to make his meaning clear.

"It's not quite like that either, Dick," he said. "Of course I know what you mean, and it's all true; only there are other things as well. You see it's like in the army. My father is an officer, and has men under him; and they do all the actual work, of course, and so on. But papa does things for them too, and so do other officers—the nice ones, I mean. I want to find something to do like that."

Again Dick scratched his head, but he did not seem to have any suggestion to offer; and Eyton sat looking very thoughtful, as he pulled gently at the bloodhound's long ears.

"Do you think you and Jane would like me to read to you in an evening, when you have done all your work? There's such a lot of time now, when it's too dark for you to be out. But perhaps you like reading to yourself best."

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"Nay, nay; I'm but a poor scholar, more's the pity. I was took young from school, and I've pretty nigh forgot all I knew. I can make shift to read a bit if the print's plain, but it don't seem much sense spelling it out so slow. I'd like a bit of reading mighty well, that I would. I've many a time wished I could teach myself a bit; but it do be so mortal hard."

"Shall I teach you?" cried Eyton eagerly. "Oh, do let me! I should so like it! We would get a book and read it together, and I could tell you all the hard words, and it would be so nice. You'd soon get to read quite well, I know. And if you like you could do some writing too. Can you write?"

"Not much to speak of. I learned a bit at school; but it's clean gone now, and I can't read writing, not a bit."

"And would you like to learn?"

Dick's stolid face had quite lighted up.

"Ay, that I would, sir; and thank you kindly for thinking of it. These long winter evenings do be main dull; for Jane generally has work on hand till eight o'clock or better, whilst I get in at five now. It's a great thing now-a-days for a chap to have a bit of eddication. I'd be pleased and proud to learn, that I would."

"Oh, I'm *so* glad!" cried Eyton eagerly. "Shall we begin to-night, Dick?"

Dick grinned and looked pleased, but remarked

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with a little hesitation that he did not know how his aunt would "take it."

"I will settle it all with Mrs. Mansfield," said Eyton, with the unconscious air of dignity that he could assume with effect at times; and Dick said to himself that the young master was every inch a Desborough.

"Are you going out driving this afternoon, Dick?" asked Eyton, rising at last.

"Yes, sir; I've got to go into town for different things we want."

"Will you let me go with you?"

"Why, yes, sir, for sure, if you wish it, and don't mind riding in a cart."

"I should like it," said the child eagerly. "I suppose there's a stationer's shop in the town?"

"Why, yes, sir, several. It's a good town is Wickstead. It has most things one wants."

Eyton went off to have a chat with Mrs. Mansfield, and found no difficulty in talking her over to his own way of thinking. The good woman had sense enough to know that occupation of some kind or another was a necessity to the child; and though it went sorely against her grain to see a Desborough, and one she recognized as Sir Aylmer's heir, left in a deserted house to the sole companionship of servants, she was helpless to alter the state of affairs, and had now small hopes of receiving any answer to her letter. A fortnight had passed since its despatch, and not a sign of response had been vouchsafed.

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So Eyton was that afternoon jolted into Wickstead in the old spring cart, and made various purchases at the stationer's there, which afforded him great satisfaction. He laid out a florin from the purse his father had given him, in copy-books, pens and pencils, and an attractive-looking reading-book with big print and occasional pictures.

Very pleased and proud he was of his new possessions when he joined Dick at the inn, and still more pleased to put them out in tempting array on the table at six o'clock, all ready for his future pupil. He had coaxed Mrs. Mansfield to allow the hour's teaching to take place in his own nursery; and though Dick looked a little sheepish at first in the unaccustomed place, he soon began to feel at home, and entered with zest into the educational exercises prepared for him.

So a new interest commenced from henceforth for Eyton, and one which did him great good. His lonely life was in danger of producing too much dreaminess in a naturally reflective disposition, and this contact with a stolid and practical nature did much to counteract his natural tendency to aimless reverie. Moreover, in assisting Dick's education, Eyton began to think of his own interrupted studies, and to wonder if he could not do something towards getting on with them alone.

He had his school-books with him, but, as might well be expected, the dry Latin and Greek exercises, and the sums he had no idea how to tackle, did not present

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any attraction to him. He had a mind that was at once active and desultory, and he was much fonder of general reading than of regular study.

Anxious to do what he ought, yet repelled by the discouraging look of dry school-books, Eyton's thoughts turned to the well-stocked shelves in the library, and he wondered if he could not find there some books suited to his comprehension.

Wandering down there one day he lighted upon a large folio edition of Milton's "Paradise Lost," with Martin's wonderful engravings.

From that moment he became absolutely entranced, and spent the greater part of his time lying on the floor with the huge book before him; for he was just the child to revel most in what was beyond the range of his actual comprehension.

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V.

EYTON'S HERO.

"OH, Mrs. Mansfield," said Eyton earnestly, "do, please, let me go to church to-day!"

"Bless the child! you need not talk as if *I* wanted to keep you away. 'Tis the distance and the wet weather, and my tiresome rheumatics, as have been against us all this while. I don't know as I can manage the walk myself, but Dick will take you, I'll be bound. He'd do anything for you, Master Eyton, that he would."

Eyton flushed with pleasure, for he admired big, burly Dick very much, and felt considerable respect for his fund of out-of-the-way information on many practical matters. These two were great friends by this time.

"How far off is our church?" asked the little boy, as he and his companion started in the early December sunshine upon their walk.

"A matter of two miles pretty nigh. Will it be too much for you, Master Eyton?"

"Oh no, not a bit; I like a good walk. Did papa

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and Uncle Aylmer go to church here when they lived at the Court? And shall I sit in the pew that they used to sit in?"

"Why, yes, sir, to be sure."

"I'm glad of that. I like doing the things that they did. Dick, how long is it since you saw my Uncle Aylmer?"

"Maybe a matter of ten years by now, sir."

"Ten years! what a long time! Why, I'm not ten yet, though I shall be soon. What a *long* time to live away from one's house!"

"So folks say, sir."

"Do you know, Dick, I like his face so *much*, now that I've looked at it more—the face in the picture, I mean. At first I wasn't sure if I did; but I do now, ever so much. I should think Uncle Aylmer was a very noble and great and good man."

"The Desboroughs is all grand folks, sir," answered Dick a little doubtfully; "and Sir Aylmer holds his head as high as any of them."

Eyton walked on for a time in silence.

"Dick, I want so much to be good," he broke out at last with great earnestness. "I want to grow up brave and good and great like papa and uncle, and I don't feel as if I properly knew how."

"Well, sir, I don't think there's much danger of your disgracing your name. You're every inch a Desborough, as it don't take half an eye to see."

"I'm glad of that," answered Eyton with natural

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sense of pride; but he knew that that was not exactly what he meant, though he did not know how better to express himself.

He looked curiously round him as he entered the small old church with its deep porch and thick stone walls. Dick handed him over to the old clerk, who ushered him pompously into a very large square pew which occupied the whole of one of the transepts; and when he rose from his knees and looked around him, he found the eyes of the whole congregation fastened upon him. Dick had not followed him, but was sitting far back almost under the belfry, and the little boy felt quite isolated in his grandeur.

He looked earnestly at the gray-headed clergyman who soon afterwards appeared in the reading-desk, and made up his mind that he had a very nice face, so kind and good and peaceful. Eyton wondered if he had known his father and uncle, and hoped he should some day have a chance of speaking to him.

As the service proceeded the child's attention wandered to the various marble tablets that adorned the walls of the transept of which he was the solitary occupant. They were all in memory of Desboroughs now dead and gone—four Sir Aylmers, one Sir Rupert, and some to other members of the family.

Sitting face to face with these memorials of the dead, a wave of inexplicable emotion swept over the child, and he realized, as he had never done so clearly before, how "the old order changeth, giving place to

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the new." He saw plainly how, one after another, the baronets had died off—few had lived beyond the age of sixty—leaving their possessions to their sons after them. And then he thought of what Dick had said—how some day perhaps he might be the baronet and master of all; and a sense of perplexed distress fell upon him at the bare prospect.

"Oh, I couldn't be that! I shouldn't know what to do. I am so little, and I know so little. It makes me frightened even to think of it."

And then came back to Eyton's mind the old resolve about being brave; and just then the clergyman went into the pulpit and gave out his text,—

"He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels."

Eyton almost held his breath as these words sounded through the church, and he turned an absorbed face towards the pulpit, resolved not to lose a single word if he could help it. The kind old clergyman, looking round upon his flock, caught sight for the first time of the child, alone in the great Desborough pew; and possibly the earnest, expectant gaze of the dark eyes touched him by its appealing wistfulness, for he spoke so clearly and plainly that Eyton was able to understand almost every word of the discourse.

In simple words he explained to his hearers that the enemy to be overcome was sin, in whatever form

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it assailed us; and that the only power by which we could overcome was by faith in Jesus and the power of his Holy Spirit. He went on to tell how He might be approached by those who wished to be his servants; how they must come to him first in repentant love and receive his pardon for past sins; and that his tender forgiveness and fatherly love would be their help for the future, and a shield and buckler against temptation.

It all seemed so clear and plain that Eyton felt as if his father were talking to him again, explaining the truths he was so anxious to impress upon the child's mind, and smoothing away the difficulties in his path.

The few solemn words at the close, about the glorious reward waiting for those who had overcome through the blessing of God, brought unexpected tears to Eyton's eyes. It seemed to him a very happy thing to reach that bright land, where no sorrow or trouble could enter, and hear sweet welcome words of acceptance from the heavenly Father there. It was no morbid feeling that prompted the thought—the child had no consciousness of choosing death before life; but sitting face to face with the memorials of the dead, he could not but wonder what it would be like to join them there on the other side, and he felt that there was something sweet and restful in the idea of that general meeting in the land where partings cannot come.

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As Eyton left the church that day, he heard a good deal of whispering amongst the rustics gathered round the porch, and caught the words which several of them uttered,—

"The little heir!" "Sir Aylmer's nephew—his heir, you know." "He'll be the master here some day, for sure." "A real Desborough he is."

Eyton was a little embarrassed by all the attention he excited, but he took off his cap with childish courtesy as the women courtesied to him and the men pulled their forelocks. He was glad to come upon Dick on the outskirts of the crowd; but his adventures were not over yet, for before he reached the lich-gate Dick came to a sudden halt, and the little boy saw that the clergyman was advancing rather rapidly towards him from the church.

"How do you do, my child?" he asked kindly. "I could not let you go without coming to say a few words of welcome. I only heard last week of your arrival, or I should have come up to see you earlier. I knew your father and mother well. You are very like them both."

"Am I? I am so glad."

"You have not been to church before, I think?"

"No; I wanted to, but it was so wet, and Mrs. Mansfield could not walk. Dick brought me to-day. He is very kind. We are great friends. I hope I shall be able to come every Sunday now."

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"I hope so too, my little man. Will you tell me your name?"

"Eyton Desborough."

"Well, Eyton, I will come and see you one of these days when I can get time; and you must come and see me and Mrs. Creighton some afternoon and take tea with us."

"Oh, thank you, sir. I shall like that. You are very kind."

"I like to know all my parishioners, and you and I ought to be friends. How long are you going to remain at the Court?"

"I don't know quite—until father can fetch me. He's in Egypt now, fighting; but his leave has been due a long time, and when he can be spared he will come home for a year or more, and we shall be together again."

Good Mr. Creighton's face looked gravely compassionate, for he knew that affairs in Egypt were beginning to look very ugly, and that many brave officers and men who had gone out there would never see their native land again. But of course he said no word of this to the child, only shook the small hand frankly extended very kindly as he bid him farewell.

"Good-bye, sir. I liked your sermon *so* much," said Eyton; "it reminded me of papa, and I understood it every bit."

"I am glad to hear it, my child. I am pleased

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for little people to understand what they hear. We shall be good friends one of these days, I feel sure."

Altogether that was a bright day for Eyton. He went home with quite a glow in his heart; and in the afternoon he got Dick to come upstairs to his nursery, and they had a "Bible lesson" together—that is to say, they read verses in turn, and gravely discussed their meaning together.

Eyton was more than ever anxious after that day to make himself worthy to follow in the footsteps of the Desboroughs who had gone before him. His imagination was increasingly fascinated by the thought of the lonely Sir Aylmer, who had loved his sweet mother so dearly; and though he did not know why he should have left his home because she had married his brother, he felt that there was something mysterious and romantic in the story, and he would sit for hours before his uncle's picture dreaming about him, and wondering if he would ever come home.

"He *might* come home any time," he sometimes said to himself. "Mrs. Mansfield told me so. He might walk straight into this room where I am, and sit down in that chair, and nobody ever know he was in the house." Eyton had a great idea of suddenness and secretiveness with regard to his uncle's movements. "Then I should get up and go to him and say, 'How do you do?' He might not remember who I was, but then I should tell him; and I should have

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such lots of questions to ask him, I think we should go on talking till bed-time."

Indeed Eyton would go on with his imaginary interviews with the unknown uncle till at last Sir Aylmer became a distinct reality to him, and he would rather fluster Mrs. Mansfield from time to time by remarks or questions that were to her altogether inexplicable.

"I think if Uncle Aylmer were to come home, he and I would soon be great friends," he said one day in his reflective way. "Don't you?"

"Well, really I don't know. Sir Aylmer never was much of a gentleman for making friends; and you're but a child yet, Master Eyton."

"Yes, I know that; but, you see, we are relations, and that helps, and we should have such lots to say. He would want to know everything about papa and mamma, and when once one gets talking of *them*, one can go on and on almost any time. And I want to know every single thing about him, from the time he was a little, tiny boy up till now. Oh, I know we should be *great* friends. I do wish he would come home."

Mrs. Mansfield glanced at the child's earnest face and said nothing; she only pursed up her lips in a fashion that would have said volumes to some people, but which Eyton did not even observe.

"You see I am trying hard to be as like my uncle as I can. I mean to learn as much as I can. Dick

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said he knew ever such a lot, and was always reading the big books in the library. He said he was much fonder of reading than papa. Now, I like reading in the library too; that's why I think sometimes I must be rather like Uncle Aylmer. I can't understand all I read, but I like it all, and I understand a good bit; and what I understand I tell Dick, and that helps me to remember better. I shouldn't like uncle to think me an idle, ignorant boy, if he came home. I am sure he was never stupid or lazy, and so I want to learn as much as ever I can."

"Well, there's no harm in that, child. The more you can learn the better 'twill be, no doubt. But you ought to have proper schooling, that you ought. Them books is all very well, but that's not the way gentlefolks ought to be eddicated—that I know."

Eyton sighed a little. He had a perception of this himself; but his leisurely reading was very dear to him. He liked to dream as he read, and weave his own fancies in amongst dry, hard facts.

"I asked papa about that in my last letter," he said. "I told him what I was doing and what you said. But I don't know quite when he will get my letter. His don't come very regularly. I wonder if Uncle Aylmer will ever answer your letter. Perhaps he doesn't answer because he's coming home. If he came home, I daresay he would teach me himself. I should ask him to. I know he would be kind to me, because he was so fond of mamma."

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"The master isn't like to come home just yet a while," was the rather hasty response. "He isn't the kind of gentleman you seem to think for, Master Eyton. He evidently don't mean to take no notice of my letter, nor yet of you. It's all in a piece with his way of going on all through. The wonder is he ever let you come here at all."

Eyton did not quite understand this sudden tirade; he supposed that Mrs. Mansfield was a little "put out;" and he wandered back to his favourite library, to sit cross-legged in the fading light before the picture of the baronet, and talk softly to King, who always understood and sympathized, of the hero of his childish dreams.

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VI.

SAD NEWS.

MRS. MANSFIELD thought that perhaps she had spoken a little too hastily as to Sir Aylmer's intentions when, one day about the middle of December, a yellow envelope was brought to the door, with the usual five shillings to pay upon it.

Nobody but Sir Aylmer ever telegraphed, and the housekeeper knew that the missive was from her master, probably in response to her letter, now five or six weeks old.

"Just like him! paying shillings and shillings for a few words, when a few pence would get a letter sent that would tell one some sense. I've no patience with such ways; but the master he never can do like other folks."

All this time the good woman was wiping her hands upon her apron, and then she proceeded to open the missive.

"Lawks-a-mussy!" was her first astonished exclamation, and she sat down suddenly, looking quite pale and startled.

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As she was alone there was no commotion caused by this unusual display of emotion; and she read aloud the words of the telegram, as if to impress them upon her own brain,—

"Captain Desborough killed. Break it to boy."

That was all; not a detail of any kind, nothing but the bare, crushing fact that the brave soldier, the child's only parent, was killed. Good Mrs. Mansfield rocked herself backwards and forwards in sincere distress; for she was too loyal a servant of the Desboroughs to hear without a sense of personal sorrow of the death of any one bearing that name, whilst the picture of Eyton's grief when he should be told presented itself in vivid colours before her mind's eye. It was easy to say, "Break it to boy," but how was the breaking to be accomplished? The housekeeper had never had so hard a task set before her in her life. She was fairly puzzled what to do.

At length she rose and went to the yard to take counsel with Dick. He and Eyton were by this time such fast friends that possibly he might have a suggestion. And to her great relief he had; for after having digested the true meaning of the bald sentences, he said briefly:—

"Let's get the rector to come and tell him."

It was like a weight rolled off Mrs. Mansfield's heart to feel that she need not herself be the bearer of the heavy tidings.

"The very thing, Dick," she exclaimed eagerly.

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"There's nobody like our rector in all the country-side when folks are in trouble. And he knew the captain too. Go and tell him, and fetch him over this minute. He's sure to come."

Eyton was spending his morning in the library. Jane always lighted a fire for him there now, and he generally lay upon the floor with his big book in front of him, in full view either of his mother's picture or that of his uncle, about whom he thought so much. To-day his book was Rapin's "History of England," and the child was, as usual, identifying his unknown uncle with the various statesmen and heroes of which he read.

He had raised himself to a sitting posture, and had gone off into a long reverie, with his eyes fixed on Sir Aylmer's portrait, when the opening of the door caused him slowly to turn his head.

Next moment he had scrambled to his feet with a bright smile of welcome.

"O Mr. Creighton, how do you do? How kind of you to come and see me so soon!"

"Well, my little friend, and how are you to-day? and what are you doing all alone in this big room?"

"I come here to do lessons—at least I mean I come to read, because I have no lessons to do. I don't want to grow up a dunce. I think I like reading better than lessons."

"I daresay you do—so do many other people, both little and big;" and Mr. Creighton seated himself in

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an arm-chair, and drew the child to his side. "And what do you think about all alone in this big house? Do you play games in your head, like I used to do when I was a little boy?"

"Oh yes; often," cried Eyton eagerly. "Did you do that too? I play games about Uncle Aylmer coming home, and the things we might talk about and do together. I think a great deal about Uncle Aylmer; he seems very interesting to me. That's his picture over there. Don't you think he has a very nice face?"

The question was so brightly and eagerly asked that it evoked a smile.

"You speak as though you were fond of your Uncle Aylmer."

"Why, so I am of course!" cried Eyton. "People always are fond of their relations, aren't they? He's my uncle, you know. I think he's a very great and good man, and I'm sorry for him because he's lonely. Please, can you tell me anything more about him that Mrs. Mansfield doesn't know?"

"I am glad you are fond of your uncle, Eyton," said the clergyman, not directly answering the question, "because I foresee in the future that you will have to look to him a great deal for almost everything."

It was the tone in which these words were spoken rather than the words themselves that struck upon the child with a premonition of evil tidings to come.

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He was acutely sensitive to passing impressions, and now he suddenly raised his eyes and met the searching, sorrowful gaze, which added certainty to his vague surmise. He began to tremble, and his lip quivered.

"Please tell me what it is," he began tremulously. "Has something—happened?"

"My dear little boy, things are always happening in this world of ours that seem sad and sorrowful to us, because we look only on one side of the picture. If we could have faith to see the other, we should find that the joy and gladness far outweighed the sorrow."

The child's wistful dark eyes were fixed questioningly upon the clergyman's face. He made no attempt to speak.

"You told me on Sunday, Eyton, that you understood my sermon. If you did so, as I hope you did, you would understand a little of the joy and peace and glory that is waiting for God's faithful soldiers and servants who have 'overcome' sin and death, and have been received into the beautiful home above, and 'confessed' before the heavenly Father! Did you understand that at all, my child?"

Eyton nodded vehemently; he was afraid to trust his voice. His eyes were blinded with tears, and the whole room seemed swimming before him.

"And so if any one you greatly loved were to be called to leave this world, with all its trials and

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troubles, and pass into the sunshine beyond, to be clad for ever in white raiment, and live in the light of the love of our dear Saviour, would you think it very, very sad? Would you not try to be brave and unselfish, and rejoice in the happiness of one you loved? My dear little boy, you are very young to understand the full blessedness of those who die in the Lord, yet I think you can enter a little into it. Will you try to do this, for the sake of the brave soldier who has gone to meet his reward, and who will be waiting and watching at the golden gate for the little son he has left behind?"

Eyton stood very still; the trembling had ceased now that the blow had fallen, but the room still seemed turning dizzily round and round.

"Is it—is it—my father?" he whispered at last with white lips; and Mr. Creighton bent his head and kissed the boy's pale brow as he answered tenderly,—

"Our loving Father in heaven has been so good to your father that He has made the separation very brief between him and his sweet young wife. Your father and mother are together now, Eyton. You must think of the happy, happy meeting on the other side of the river. You must think that in a few more years, please God, you will join them there, never to be parted any more. I think, my child, that your father may be nearer to you than when he was far away in a distant land. Perhaps he is even now watching over his little boy, praying for

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him in his hour of need, and longing to see him comforted by the certainty that all that God does is done in love, and is really best of all."

After those words Eyton remembered nothing clearly for what seemed to him a considerable time; and when at length he opened his tired eyes to the light, with a feeling that somehow all the world had grown cold and dark, he found that several things had happened of which he retained no recollection.

He was no longer standing beside Mr. Creighton, but was lying on a couch opposite his uncle's picture; and Mrs. Mansfield was in the room, and there was a queer smell of drugs, or of something which was unfamiliar and pungent.

He looked up to meet the kindly glance of the rector's eyes, and then he struggled into a sitting posture and wondered what had happened.

"He will do now, thank you, Mrs. Mansfield," said Mr. Creighton. "It was the shock that upset him a little, but he is better now."

Then Mrs. Mansfield turned and went, with many lingering, backward glances; and Eyton remembered everything—how he was fatherless now as well as motherless, quite alone in the world.

"Except for Uncle Aylmer," and he unconsciously spoke those words aloud.

Mr. Creighton seemed to understand the drift of the observation.

"Yes, Eyton, you still have your Uncle Aylmer."

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Eyton looked intently at the picture.

"Do you think he knows?"

"Yes, we are sure he does."

"How do you know?"

"Because it was he who telegraphed the news here."

Eyton looked suddenly more interested.

"Did he? I didn't know that. And do you know where he is?"

"The telegram was from Egypt."

"Egypt! Why, that is where papa is!"

He had not yet learned to speak of his father in the past tense.

"Yes, my boy; and I think it is quite possible, though you must not build too much upon the hope, that your uncle and your father have lately met. Possibly even your uncle was with him when he died. At any rate he could not have been far away."

A great sob rose in Eyton's throat, but was bravely choked down.

"Do you think he went to Egypt to see papa?"

"I think it is very probable he did."

"That would be *just* like Uncle Aylmer!" cried Eyton, with a sudden rush of warm feeling towards the unseen kinsman; and these words were followed by a burst of natural, healing tears, which the good clergyman was glad to see.

When the tears were dried the little boy was able to speak of his loss without restraint, and an hour's

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quiet talk with his kind friend did much to comfort and cheer him. Mr. Creighton spoke so clearly and beautifully about the real meaning of death, and made the child so fully understand his father's great gain, that the worst of the loneliness and bitterness passed quite away, and in the background of his thoughts was always the feeling that there was still Uncle Aylmer left; and Eyton felt perfectly certain that his uncle had been with his father at the hour of his death.

This thought was such an immense comfort to him that no one attempted to cast doubt upon the supposition. Sir Aylmer's movements were so erratic, and his caprices so variable, that it was impossible to hazard a speculation as to what he might or might not take into his head to do. Certainly the fact that he was in Egypt at a time when no ordinary travellers would dream of venturing there seemed to imply a settled purpose of some kind, which purpose might possibly be a visit to the brother he had so fondly loved in the days of their youth. On the other hand, it might be some utterly different motive that took him there, and the fact that he was near the headquarters of the British troops might be a mere coincidence.

However, Eyton had no manner of doubt upon the subject; and his certainty was a source of great comfort to him. He spent more hours than ever dreaming over his uncle's picture, putting him more and more into the first place in his heart.

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Mr. Creighton, who came frequently to see the boy, and grew greatly interested in him, became anxious as to his future, and wrote seriously to the baronet (forwarding the letter through his bankers) on the subject.

Now that Captain Desborough was dead, Sir Aylmer became the boy's natural guardian and protector, and it was needful that some suitable arrangement should be made regarding him. His present lonely life in the deserted house was neither natural nor healthy.

But as all who knew him were well aware, Sir Aylmer was no easy person to bring to a point. He hated coming to a decision, and any kind of business was distasteful to him. Moreover, it was more than probable that Eyton's very existence was a cause of offence to him, and that he would feel peculiar resentment at being called upon to legislate for his well-being. So that the following telegram from Italy did not greatly surprise the rector:—

"Get him a pony, and let him run wild. It will do him no harm."

That was all; and though the clergyman entertained a private opinion of his own that Sir Aylmer was travelling homewards in his desultory, erratic way, and would presently appear on the spot to see after his nephew and heir, he was afraid to breathe a word of this idea to any one, or even to act upon it.

It might be months, years perhaps, before the

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baronet might really appear, and meantime something ought to be done for the child.

After turning matters over in his mind for a time, he came to the conclusion that he would teach the boy himself. The pony certainly simplified matters considerably. Eyton could ride over to the rectory two or three mornings in the week, and study regularly and systematically for a couple of hours. On the other days he would have set tasks to do at home; and thus his education might be carried on with a fair chance of success, until he was old enough to go to a public school.

It would have seemed more natural and better for the boy to have meantime been placed at some good preparatory school; but of course that could not be done without the uncle's sanction, and Eyton had taken such a liking for the old house and its books and pictures, that the idea of life with boys of his own age had lost its attractions for him.

He was, however, delighted to hear of the pony, and the lessons at the rectory, and took quite a healthy, childish interest in the thought of his daily rides.

Dick was as pleased as his little master, and promised to come with him on old Dobbin when he explored the country round. There were plenty of old saddles and bridles about the place, and the stableman was eager over the thought of riding again.

Eyton had been accustomed to horse exercise all his

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life, and was greatly elated at the idea of a pony all his own.

"I think it is so kind of Uncle Aylmer to think of it," he confided eagerly to Dick. "And, you see, when he comes back we shall be able to go out riding together!"

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VII.

RED ROVER.

"WELL, I think it looks about the right thing this time," said Dick, surveying the newcomer with a critical eye; and Eyton, who was standing waiting for the verdict with breathless expectancy, clapped his hands and capered for joy.

"He's the prettiest of all! he's a little beauty! O Dick, do you really think he'll do?"

"Can't see nothing wrong with him so far—good feet, clean legs, age in his mouth, good sight, steps well, goes true, plenty of breeding in him. I know the place he comes from too. He's had first-rate good run over down-country when he was a colt. Nothing like that for the feet, Master Eyton. I think we've got the right fellow at last."

Eyton's face beamed. For a fortnight or more they had been looking out for a pony for him, and full half-a-dozen had come up to be inspected, with every one of which the little boy had fallen in love at first sight.

To his great disappointment, however, Dick's sharp

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eyes had found blemishes in every one of them. The gray was too old, and was shaky on its legs. The black "went near" in front, and would be sure to come down before long. The bay had a bad splint and was lame on it; though Eyton could not see that he was lame at all. And the roan had "no blood in it," and was touched in the wind as well. The child had begun to despair of ever being suited with a pony "fit for a young gentleman like him to ride," when at last he had heard that there was another in the yard, and had rushed out to learn Dick's verdict.

The pony was certainly a dear little fellow. He was a self-coloured chestnut, with tawny mane and tail, and no white on face or feet. He stood fourteen hands high—so Eyton thought him almost a horse—and his neck was thick and arched, and his ears were small and pointed, and he was altogether as pretty a creature as one need wish to see.

King went up and snuffed him with the air of a judge; and the pony seemed to like this mark of attention, for he turned his pretty head and laid his nose against the hound's head, and the pair made friends on the spot.

When Dick had finished his careful and lengthy examination, and had pronounced a very favourable opinion, Eyton's delight was unbounded.

"Oh, I am so glad! He's *much* the nicest of any. What a clever Dick you are to know so much. I

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should have thought any of them would do, but I am glad we waited for this one."

"It don't never do to choose a horse nor a wife in a hurry," returned Dick in the oracular way that always greatly impressed Eyton. "You've got a lot of things to think of and look to. I wouldn't never go and buy a pig in a poke, nor yet a pony for you, Master Eyton, that I couldn't answer for."

"And you can answer for this one?"

"If his wind's right, which I'm just a-going to try —not that I've a doubt of it—I may say I can. Look at that shoulder now! A horse with that shoulder will never come down. Just you take the halter, please, sir, whilst I get the saddle and bridle down. I must try his paces and test his wind, and see he has no tricks. If all seems right, you shall have a turn yourself next."

Eyton's eyes beamed as he stood holding the pony. He had brought a piece of sugar in his pocket, and amused himself by trying to induce the new arrival to take it. But the chestnut had never tasted sugar before, and was fairly puzzled by it, turning it over and over on Eyton's hand with his lips, fascinated by the sweet flavour, but half afraid of tackling the whole lump.

"He won't be long learning to like it," said Dick, coming up with saddle and bridle. "All horses love a bit of sugar, once they learn what it is.—Soh, boy, soh—steady, steady.—Ah, he knows he's to be taken

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out, that he does. I like to see them paw and prance a bit at sight of a saddle; shows they've the right stuff in them. I hope he isn't going to be too much of a handful for you though, Master Eyton."

"Oh, I hope not—I don't think so," answered Eyton eagerly. "Papa says—I mean my father used to say I rode very well," and then the smile suddenly faded from the child's face, and he leaned his head against the pony's neck to hide the sudden rush of tears that had filled his eyes. He wondered for a moment how he could be glad about anything, least of all about a new pony that his father would never see him ride.

Dick saw his emotion and guessed its cause, but he very wisely took no notice, and went on talking in the same strain, as he tightened the girths and buckled the straps.

"Chestnuts is either hot or else they're slugs," said he, by which, as Eyton understood, he meant that they were generally very fast or very slow. "If I ain't deceived, this gentleman is going to turn out hot; but he hasn't got a bit of vice in him, one can see that by his eye. Now give him his head, please, sir. Thank you." Dick was by this time in the saddle. "No, he don't plunge or kick up, nor nothing. He takes it all quite quiet like. And if you would kindly open the gate into the paddock, Master Eyton, I'll have a good try at his paces, and see how he behaves when he's got turf under his feet. That's

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always a pretty good test with a young thing like this."

Eyton ran eagerly forward to do as he was asked. The wave of feeling had passed over by this time, and the behaviour of the pony was engrossing all his attention. He stood in the middle of the paddock, and ran from place to place as Dick walked and trotted and galloped the pretty creature round and round; and when he finished up by putting him at an easy jump, which he took as cleanly as a trained hunter, the boy clapped his hands with delight.

"Oh, he's right enough!" was Dick's assertion as he dismounted in the yard. "Wind's sound, paces and mouth good. He's a bit green yet, but a little handling will soon cure that. Yes, sir, we'll keep him on a week's trial, and if he pleases you at the end, we'll buy him out and out."

"Oh, I'm sure we shall keep him, he's such a dear thing!"

"Yes, I expect we shall; but we won't act in any way hasty. Now, I'll give him a good grooming down—he wants it with his long coat on—and when you've had your dinner you shall take him out, and I'll come with you on Dobbin."

Eyton's eyes were very bright as he ran indoors to tell the good news to Mrs. Mansfield, and she was glad indeed to see him look so childlike again. Since his father's death he had grown both pale and grave, and had spent more time than ever in solitary brood-

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ing, reading less and thinking more, until she began to feel quite anxious about him.

The thing that interested him most was the choice of the pony, and he had always been roused out of his dreaminess by the arrival of a new creature; but at other times he would sink back into a sort of abstracted sadness that hardly seemed natural at his age. At twilight, when he came stealing into her parlour, he would sit staring into the fire and ask strange, unchildlike questions on abstruse, metaphysical subjects altogether beyond her ken, and it was her great wish that his lessons at the rectory might soon begin. They would take him out of himself, and give him occupation for his thoughts; and Mr. Creighton's influence would be sure to be good.

So she was pleased indeed to hear of the new possession, and went out into the yard herself at half-past two to see him mount and start.

Eyton's face was flushed, and he looked "a Desborough all over" as he bestrode the sturdy chestnut, and gathered up the new reins preparatory to a start.

King, who in his younger days had many a time run with his masters on their rides, broke into a deep bay of joy and rushed round the stable-yard in a manner indicative of excitement. Mrs. Mansfield was afraid he would frighten the pony, and wished to shut him up; but Eyton would not hear of it, and the chestnut's nerves seemed under perfect control.

"He's been used to dogs, one can see that," said

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Dick as he mounted old Dobbin. "Well, sir, are you ready? Perhaps you'll not mind my riding alongside you to-day, for fear the pony shows any tricks. When we know all about him, I'll look up an old livery and go behind, as my place is."

Eyton, however, thought it much more sociable to go together, and said so. He waved his cap to Mrs. Mansfield as they left the yard, and then gave himself over to the enjoyment of his new possession.

"I think we'll go to the rectory and ask Mr. Creighton about my lessons, and when I can begin. Now that I've got a pony, I could go any day, couldn't I, Dick?"

"Why, yes, sir, for sure you could."

"And I could have a ride in the afternoon too on lesson days, couldn't I, Dick? The pony won't be tired just taking me to the rectory?"

"Bless you, no, sir; not he. A young thing like that wants a lot of work. He'd be all the better for ten or twelve miles a day, he would; and these soft, muddy, winter roads won't hurt his legs a bit. He'd hunt well too, I haven't a doubt; but I don't know as you'd care to follow the hounds."

Eyton made no immediate answer. He remembered the stories his father used sometimes to tell him of breathless runs across country with the hounds; but he remembered also that these accounts had been accompanied with words of counsel or warning which

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at the time the child had hardly understood, though they clung to his retentive memory.

"Hunting and shooting, and field sports generally, are fine things in their way, Eyton, and capital amusements for a man who can really afford them; but, my boy, if it should ever be your lot to turn country gentleman and landed proprietor, take care you do not grow too fond of mere amusement, and develop a passion for sport to the exclusion of other and more important employments. A man who is a sportsman, and nothing else, is about as useless and as selfish an individual as exists in the world."

Eyton, who naturally did not understand all this, thought of it, nevertheless, and after a pause for consideration, he said,—

"I should like to see a hunt, but I think perhaps I had better not. I should not like to go without asking leave, and there's no one to ask now. Some day perhaps I'll talk to Mr. Creighton about it. He would know."

And then, at Dick's suggestion, he put his pony to a trot and then to a canter, and in the enjoyment of rapid exercise all else was forgotten.

Mr. Creighton came out to see his little visitor, and to admire his new possession. He knew something about horses, and quite approved Dick's choice. He too knew the farm where the creature had been reared, and was confident that he would turn out well, if not too spirited for a young rider.

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Eyton, however, seemed quite fearless, and looked as if he and his steed already understood each other; and after fixing his first lesson-day for the following morning, he rode away with Dick for a good long gallop over the high moorland ridge above the church and village.

The boy looked another creature as they jogged home again in the gathering dusk.

"I must find a name for him," he said, as he patted the neck of his pony. "What do you think would be a nice name for him, Dick? I've been thinking all the time, and I can't fix on one yet."

"Carrots," suggested Dick, with a glance at the tossing red mane.

"Oh no!" cried Eyton almost indignantly, "that's a common, low kind of name; I shouldn't like it at all."

"Carrots is fine things for horses, all the same—in moderation," returned Dick stolidly. "If you want a fine name why not take the long one you told me t'other day beginning with a D. Something like Dresdimunda."

"Oh, you mean Desdemona, I suppose; but she was a woman, you know. There was Othello; but I shouldn't like that—not for anything but a big, very black horse. Rufus is a *red* name, but I don't think it is pretty. I wish you could help me, Dick."

Dick scratched his head and wished he could; but his suggestions were not happy, and somehow none of the names of Eyton's favourite heroes seemed to fit

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the chestnut pony. Nor could he agree with Dick's opinion that "any name did when one was used to it."

"I should like to call him Aylmer, or Sir Aylmer; but I don't think it would be quite respectful somehow. Dick, my Uncle Aylmer must have had horses once. What did he call his favourite?"

"Why, his great chestnut hunter was called Red Rover. He was a rare good beast, he was."

"Red Rover! oh, I like that!" cried Eyton eagerly. "I'll call mine Red Rover too. Then I shall feel just a little like Uncle Aylmer. Red Rover, do you like your name? I think it just suits you;" and giving the pony's nose half-a-dozen warm kisses as he slipped off in the yard, he ran indoors, thirsty for his tea, and anxious to tell Mrs. Mansfield all about his afternoon.

A week later Eyton sat alone in his nursery with a sheet of note-paper before him, copying in his best handwriting the following epistle that he knew by heart from the pains he had taken in its composition. He had penned it by his own earnest wish, though he could see Mrs. Mansfield had been a little against the plan. He had consulted with her what to say and what to leave unsaid, and this was the result of their joint labours:—

"DEAR UNCLE AYLMER,—I want to tell you that I have got a pony, and that I have called him Red Rover after your horse; and I thank you very much for giving him to me. I think it was very kind

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indeed, and I always knew how kind you were; and I want to see you very much, so I hope you will soon come home.

"Red Rover is six; he has very good legs and pasterns, Dick says, and he goes very fast, but he doesn't pull much unless he is very excited. Once he nearly ran away, but I stopped him before he had gone very far. He has only shied once. Mr. Creighton is very kind. I go to read with him at the rectory, and do lessons three times a week in the mornings if it is fine. I hope I shall learn very fast, so that you will not find me very ignorant when you come home.

"In the evenings I teach Dick. Dick doesn't think you will remember him; but he remembers you, so I think you will. He was a stable-boy once and then groom. He takes care of Red Rover, and is very kind to him. He is kind to me too. So is everybody here. He comes with me sometimes on Dobbin, but he can't keep up when Red Rover gallops. Dobbin is getting old, like King; but King can keep up if he tries, but he doesn't always care to. King comes to the rectory and lies in the veranda. Red Rover goes to the stable. They have to take his saddle and bridle off, or else he gets so impatient.

"I hope you are quite well. We are all well here. We all send our respectful duty, and I send you my love too. I hope you will soon come home, for I want to see you very much.—I remain your affectionate nephew, E. DESBOROUGH."

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VIII.

A GLIMPSE AT A SELF-WILLED MAN.

IF Eyton had known the effect his letter would produce upon his uncle's mind, he would certainly not have written it.

Sir Aylmer Desborough had, as Mr. Creighton had shrewdly surmised, reluctantly made up his mind to pay a visit to his ancestral home, and make some definite plans for the future maintenance of his nephew, now his ward and only relative.

It had been very hard to arrive at this resolution, and the nearer the baronet approached his native country the less did he feel inclined to go on with the undertaking.

When a man has for ten years or more led an idle, aimless life, shirking all his natural duties, and following no rule but only idle caprice, it is no light matter to make a personal sacrifice, and take a distasteful course of action, simply from a feeling that it is right to do so.

Sir Aylmer had told himself again and again that he was a "fool for his pains," and that the boy was

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"nothing to him;" yet with the memory of a certain dying charge fresh in his mind, he had not been able to dismiss the matter from his mind, and he had been slowly wending his way towards England, when, at Turin, Eyton's letter reached him.

He read it attentively twice through, and then laid the paper down before him and meditated a while in silence, after which he began to soliloquize in the fashion men often acquire when they spend much of their time alone.

"This puts quite a new face on affairs," he said. "I am glad the child wrote. It will save me the trouble of a very unpleasant journey. He is plainly all right, enjoying his life, and well cared for by good Mansfield and her relatives. I was a fool to think the boy would pine, or care two straws for his father's death. Philip was always a sentimental fellow, and dying men are full of fancies."

He stopped short there, and presently heaved a deep sigh, whilst a gentler look crossed his face.

"Poor fellow! poor fellow! how I loved him once! Well, I would have changed places with him then if I had been able. If money or skill could have saved him, he would not be lying out there under the burning sun of the East; and I can still find it in my heart to wish that I were lying beside him there. Heigh-ho! this is a strange world of ours. Those taken who have so much to live for, and aimless, worthless lives prolonged! Well, well, we must take

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life as it comes, I suppose, since we cannot change or order it."

Then he picked up the letter again.

"But Philip's anxiety was plainly misplaced. The boy is like all other boys. A new pony consoles him for the death of a parent. He is content and happy, and in no need of looking after.

"Creighton has taken him in hand—that is one comfort. Creighton is a good old fellow, and will do much better for the boy than I could. I will make some return to him one day for the expenditure of time he is making over the boy. Meantime things can go on as they are. It would be a thousand pities to disturb them. I only do harm when I try to meddle in other people's business. I will not go back at all—not for another twelvemonth at least; perhaps not then," and with that he sharply rang his bell.

In a few minutes the summons was answered by a gray-headed valet, who had been in the baronet's service ever since he was a young man fresh from college.

"Bunyard," said Sir Aylmer abruptly, "I have changed my plans. I am not going back to England at present."

Bunyard was accustomed to his master's erratic ways, and generally took a change of plan very quietly, but to-day he looked greatly disappointed and rather troubled.

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"Not going to England, sir? I am sorry to hear that."

"And I am precious glad. I detest the country; I always did."

Bunyard did not attempt to gainsay this statement, though it was a manifest exaggeration. He hesitated a moment, and then said in a quiet, respectful way,—

"And where then do you propose going, sir? Shall you remain on here?"

"No, certainly not. Italy is little better than England at this season. All Europe is intolerable in the winter. It is a mere mockery to talk of its blue skies and balmy zephyrs. I shall go where one gets something worth calling heat. I think we'll take the next Brindisi boat to Bombay, and when the hot season comes I will go up to Cashmere again."

But Bunyard was looking very grave.

"You do not surely mean what you say, sir?" he questioned.

"Indeed I do, my good fellow. Why should I not?"

"Surely, sir, you cannot forget what the doctors have all told you, about the risk you run in exposing yourself to a hot climate. After all the warnings you have had, you will surely not venture into the tropics again."

"The tropics are the only decent places to live in," answered Sir Aylmer lazily. "I do not call existence in these disgusting climates life. My good fellow, I

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shall take no harm. I know exactly what to do to avert fever and all my other enemies; besides, as I told you, I shall go up country long before the heat comes. Cashmere in the summer is an earthly paradise."

But Bunyard's face was still very serious, and after a pause he spoke again. He had been so long in Sir Aylmer's service that he ventured to remonstrate with him as few servants would dare to do with so stern and self-willed a man as his master.

"If you go to India, sir, you cannot consult Sir David Ruxton."

"Who said I wanted to do any such thing?" questioned the baronet shortly.

"Well, sir, it was the doctor who attended the captain that warned you so gravely, and advised you to go to him as the first authority of the day for cases like yours. I quite understood that you had made up your mind to do so."

"I should have thought you knew me well enough by this time, Bunyard, to be certain that what I make up my mind to do one day, I generally decide against the next. The very fact that I have been dawdling towards the land of fog for nearly a month ought to have convinced you I should never reach it. I am *not* going to England, so there is an end of the matter."

"Very well, sir. I suppose you are prepared to take the consequences?"

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"Quite, thank you."

"And shall I prepare to start for the south at once?"

"Yes; immediately."

"Very good, sir. I only hope you will not regret your decision later."

Sir Aylmer laughed derisively.

"You mean you hope I shall, my good fellow—you mean you hope I shall."

Bunyard turned and looked at his master with an air of grave protest.

"I mean no such thing, sir, begging your pardon, as you should know by this time for yourself."

Sir Aylmer seemed touched by a passing feeling of compunction.

"I do know it, Bunyard. I beg your pardon. I know you are much more faithful than I deserve any servant to be, and think a precious sight more of your master than he merits. I know I am a fearful nuisance to you when I am ill; but really I do mean to take care of myself, and I believe I understand my own constitution better than any doctor in the world."

Bunyard shook his head slightly, but made no other response.

"And I will go to England some day soon—I really will. I know I ought to do it eventually, but I can't make up my mind to do it just yet."

"No time like the present," quoted the man-servant solemnly.

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"Ah, but you see I am of a different opinion. 'No time like the future' is my motto. I have lived up to it very consistently for the last ten years, and it has answered very well."

Bunyard passed no comment upon this statement, only said after a short pause,—

"Then if you intend to take the next outward steamer, I had better make arrangements at once. You are sure you will not change your mind again, sir?"

"Quite sure. If you knew what a relief it was to me not to have to face that gloomy, old, haunted house again, you would not need to ask," was the quick reply.

"A house with a child in it is seldom gloomy or haunted, I take it."

"That depends, my good fellow. The child may possibly be the worst ghost of all."

And such a sad, bitter, gloomy look crossed the baronet's face that Bunyard said no more, and stole quietly away. He knew the secret of his master's sorrow, the trouble that had blighted his life; and though he had spoken as sharply as his position permitted, he was deeply sorry in his heart for the lonely, broken-hearted man.

He had been cherishing a hope that if he returned home to the old family mansion he once had loved, he would find some solace in the associations of his early life, and even in the companionship of the child. Strange as it seemed in one of his disposition, Sir

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Aylmer always exercised a species of fascination over children, and never repulsed them, though he appeared to notice them but little.

The child now at Desborough Court was the son of the two beings the master had loved best in the world, and Bunyard had cherished a secret hope that when the ice was once broken between the two, the little nephew would do much to cheer and comfort the heart of the lonely wanderer, who had at last found his way home.

But it seemed that this hope was not to be realized, and the faithful servant relinquished it with a sigh.

That night Sir Aylmer had a vivid dream.

He thought that he was back again in his ancestral home. He wandered once more through the familiar rooms, sometimes alone, sometimes with the brother who had been his playmate in childhood. But as the dream proceeded, his brother's presence was withdrawn, and all that he was conscious of was a dreary sense of blank loneliness that sank upon his heart like lead. He cried aloud to Philip to come back to him; but there was no answer save a dismal echo that seemed to reverberate through the house and to say, "Too late, too late!"

And then, in his utter desolation and isolation, he resolved to fly that dreary, haunted house, and return to it no more. He seemed to be groping his way along the interminable passages in search of a door of exit, when he became suddenly aware of a pattering

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of childish feet somewhere in the old house, and a childish voice cried out in accents of plaintive sorrow, "Uncle Aylmer, Uncle Aylmer, don't go away and leave me! O Uncle Aylmer, stay with me! I am so lonely!"

But the voice was so like one he had known long years ago, that it drove him wild to hear it, and he only rushed more frantically onwards towards the door he saw gleaming before him. Still the child's voice pursued him with its wailing, pitiful cry, "Uncle Aylmer, Uncle Aylmer! oh, do come, do stay! There is nobody left but you, and I am so very lonely. Oh, please, do not leave me all alone—come home, come home!"

But he paid no attention to the call, and ran on and on until he had left the house far behind, and the haunting voice with it; and running on and on he stumbled over the face of a precipitous cliff and fell—and woke.

For the first few moments on waking he lay revolving many things in his mind, and had almost resolved upon returning straight to England; but with the dawn of day came a revulsion of feeling. Sir Aylmer was hardly the man to be turned from his purpose by a dream; and the next steamer ploughing its way across the sea to India took up at Brindisi as a passenger that well-known traveller, Sir Aylmer Desborough.

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IX.

DREAMLAND.

AS for Eyton, he stayed on in the lonely house, looking and waiting for the letter that never came, till hope deferred made his heart sick, and he almost ceased to speak to those about him of the subject that oftenest filled his thoughts.

The lessons at the rectory formed a pleasant and healthy diversion; but notwithstanding the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Creighton, the boy was much alone, and of necessity his thoughtful dreamy ways grew upon him, and his laugh became rarer, his voice more seldom heard.

He began to live in a world of his own, peopled by creatures of his own imagination, or by the heroes of the history or fiction he read. The old rambling house made an admirable setting for the scenes he was perpetually enacting; and gradually the actual life around him grew to seem less real than the dreamland in which the greater part of his time was passed.

He got hold of Sir Walter Scott's novels in the

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library one day, and devoured them one after the other with the keenest interest. He identified himself with some character in each, and played out the whole story as if he had actually lived in it, filling up gaps and making new scenes, till it was only by an effort that he could recall his thoughts to the exigencies of the present, concentrate his mind on Dick's lessons, or answer Mrs. Mansfield's questions intelligibly.

Even when mounted on Red Rover he was generally heading some forlorn hope, or carrying tidings to some friend in peril, or flying from the pursuit of relentless foes.

Only when actually in Mr. Creighton's study did he return to the realities of life; and then more often than not he identified himself with some youthful scion of royalty or nobility, and the clergyman with the grave preceptor who directed his studies.

And the child was not unhappy in his strange, dreamy life; indeed he found it hard and even distressing to look forward to the time when these imaginings should cease to be part and parcel of his very existence. He knew that grown-up men did not feel and think after this fashion, and he could not divine how the blank could be filled when he should be too old to live in a world of his own creation.

His kind friends did all they could for him, and to them he owed more than he knew. They gave a stimulus to the devotional side of his nature, and

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prevented him from forgetting the teaching he had received from his parents.

Sunday by Sunday Eyton sat in the big pew all alone, face to face with the tablets of his dead and gone ancestors; and Sunday by Sunday he listened with grave attention to the simple words of warning or promise addressed to the people by their pastor, and resolved anew to be one of those who should overcome temptation and sin, and be counted worthy for Christ's sake to receive the promised reward.

He never forgot to think of his father and mother, united in the happy land above, and waiting there at the golden gate for their little son to join them. An earnest prayer went up each Sunday, as well as nearly every day besides, for the faith and love and help that would enable him to tread the narrow path and join them when his time came to die. His vivid imagination pictured with a keen sense of reality the peace and glory of the eternal home; and often as the child sat watching from the windows of the old house the glory of the sunset sky, he would feel an aching longing to sail out into that radiant land, as the little fleecy clouds were doing across the golden sky, and he would listen for the voices of the white-robed multitude that none can number, and fancy sometimes that he caught an echo of the eternal triumph song.

It was perhaps no wonder, all things considered, that the boy grew pale and grave, and less like an ordinary child who had external interests to occupy

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thoughts and time; no wonder that good Mrs. Mansfield sometimes shook her head, and said that Sir Aylmer would have a deal to answer for one of these days.

Eyton seldom spoke of his uncle now, but it was not because he thought of him less, only that a misgiving had occurred to him which he was afraid to put into words, lest it should be corroborated by those about him, and so become a certainty.

The misgiving came to him in this wise. One Sunday, not long after he had despatched his letter to his uncle, he became suddenly aware that there was a new tablet put up in the church amongst those of the Desboroughs.

The discovery excited him greatly, and more so still when he saw that the marble slab was put up in memory of his father, who had died fighting in Egypt. When the service was over he made eager inquiries on the subject, and found that the tablet had been put up by Sir Aylmer's orders; and this mark of respect to his dead father gave additional depth to his feelings of grateful love towards his uncle.

But as he sat Sunday after Sunday with those tablets before his eyes, he realized more completely than before that after the present Sir Aylmer there was no one save himself upon whom the title and property could descend, and he better understood what was meant by those who often spoke of him as "the little heir."

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Yes, Eyton was Sir Aylmer's heir, and the idea gave him much food for meditation. He had by this time read enough, both of history and fiction, to be aware that there was often a great deal of jealousy and ill-feeling displayed by a man towards his next successor, even when that successor was a son, and much more so when he occupied a more distant relationship.

He knew that if his uncle had had any children of his own, his eldest son would succeed, and that he himself would be nobody; and he wondered if perhaps Sir Aylmer felt angry at the thought of the succession of one who was only a nephew.

Eyton turned over in his mind many little things he had seen and heard, all of which seemed to point to this conclusion. His uncle gave him a home, it is true, but he declined to take any interest whatever in him. He would not answer letters about him or from him; and Mrs. Mansfield always spoke in a nervous kind of way when his name was mentioned, as if half afraid of what questions she might be called upon to answer.

Nobody talked willingly to him of his uncle. Eyton had gradually become aware of that; and when he spoke of his love for Sir Aylmer, and his confidence in the friendship that would one day be established between them, his remarks were always met by silence. Gradually it dawned upon the boy that his uncle had no spark of affection towards him—probably

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even disliked him; and though this conviction in no wise changed his own feelings towards his hero—indeed it seemed rather to give a new impetus to his devotion—he felt a kind of shyness of speaking on the subject, and the name of Sir Aylmer rarely passed his lips.

But if he had some elements of sadness in his life, at least there were compensating advantages, and when he had been some six months in his new home he lighted upon a treasure that at once became the centre of a new and vivid happiness.

There was one dainty little oriel chamber into which he seldom strayed. It was exquisitely furnished with rare inlaid furniture, ivory and ebony cabinets, rare gems of pictures, and all that was most choice and rich in the house seemed centred in this little room. In consequence, however, of the delicate colour of the upholstery work, everything was kept swathed up in dust sheets, and Eyton had never cared for the room, until Jane whispered to him one day that it had been prepared by Sir Aylmer for the future lady of the house, when he had been courting Miss Eyton. And when the boy understood that everything there had been prepared for his mother, all looked different in a moment, and he began to examine it all with very great interest.

One day he opened a corner cupboard that had stood closed for many long years. Its contents were covered with dust, yet the child saw something there

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that evoked a cry of delight, and he drew out a solid walnut-wood violin-case, bound in brass with a brass handle.

"A fiddle!" cried the boy breathlessly—"a fiddle! Oh, I wonder if I could play it! Mamma did begin to teach me. Oh, I do hope I haven't forgotten!"

Eyton's mother had been an accomplished musician, and had played the violin with exquisite taste and skill.

From the days of his very babyhood the child had always been absolutely entranced by the sound of music, and would listen contentedly for hours whilst his mother played.

As soon as ever he had been old enough to express his wishes clearly, he had begged to be allowed to make music for himself, and his father, in amusement at his demand, had got him a toy fiddle, which became his greatest treasure.

His mother, however, saw at once that he had a gift for the instrument, and that it was no mere toy to him; so from the first she had carefully set herself to watch him, and had taught him how to hold the fiddle, how to finger and to bow. And as he grew and his hand expanded, and his fingers developed into the long flexible digits of a musician, she took more and more interest in his education, and he had a small-sized violin bought for him, upon which he practised with a steadiness that was marvellous at his age.

Nevertheless, his greatest delight always was to get

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hold of his mother's fiddle and draw sounds from it; and she took the greatest pains to instruct him in the rudiments of musical and technical science.

At the time of his mother's death, when he was but eight years old, he had acquired a power over the instrument that was most unusual in a child, and argued distinct musical genius. But after the death of the mother, Captain Desborough could not bear to hear the sound of the violin, and Eyton so far shared this feeling that any strain of music brought a burst of tears. So for nearly a year he had not touched bow or strings, and in his sudden journey to England his fiddle had been left behind; but now another lay before him, and his heart beat fast with anticipation and delight.

He had by this time acquired sufficient favour and authority in the house, that he no longer applied at every turn for Mrs. Mansfield's sanction to his wishes.

He carried the violin-case straight off to his own quarters, and proceeded to examine it carefully. The key was tied to the handle, and the spring catches were easily mastered. In a few moments the lid was raised, and Eyton was gazing entranced at the instrument lying snugly in its blue satin nest.

Then he took it lovingly out and looked it all over, drawing the bow over the one string that was not broken, and evoking a long plaintive wail.

The sound had a strange effect upon him—his chest heaved, and sudden tears started to his eyes—but he

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seemed too absorbed even to be aware of it. One long entrancing hour he spent, recalling past knowledge, and getting the instrument into condition for playing on. There were strings in the pockets of the case; and though the pegs went hard, he managed to get them all to work at last, and by degrees got the violin strung and tuned. It was a sweet and beautiful instrument—that the boy found out at once. No doubt it had cost a large sum of money; probably it was centuries old. But all Eyton thought of was that he could play once again; and with a look of absorbed interest on his face he began picking out one of the favourite airs that he had been accustomed to play in old days.

He was occupied in this way when Mrs. Mansfield entered the nursery carrying the tea-tray for his evening meal. She was so astonished at the sound of the music that she was in some danger of dropping her burden.

"Gracious goodness, Master Eyton! Where did you get that fiddle?"

"I found it in the oriel room that is all covered up in white. You don't mind, do you? Indeed, I won't hurt it. My mother taught me to play—she had begun to teach me, I mean, before she died. Please, don't say I may not have it. You don't know how I love to have something to play, and this is such a beauty."

"So it ought to be, seeing the master gave two

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hundred guineas for it," was the rather sharp answer. "A Cremona violin isn't no child's toy, Master Eyton, I can tell you. I don't know whatever your uncle would say if he saw you with it now."

Eyton lowered the instrument, his eyes filling with tears.

"Mayn't I have it then?" he asked falteringly. "Indeed I shan't hurt it."

Mrs. Mansfield never could stand the pleading wistfulness of Eyton's dark eyes. She was anxious too about the boy, who had been looking pale and thin of late. She was glad that he should find any new source of interest and amusement, and her heart relented in a moment.

"There, don't cry, child. It isn't my place to say what you are and what you are not to have; and if we wrote to the master he wouldn't send us no answer. You must take great care of it; but I don't see why you shouldn't play on it, if your heart's set on it."

Eyton heaved a sigh of relief.

"Oh, thank you. I didn't know before how I'd missed my fiddle. Is this Uncle Aylmer's?"

"Well, he bought it; so I suppose it is."

"But I mean, did he play on it?"

"Not he; he isn't no musician. Not but what he can play the piano well enough. He used to play accompaniments for her whilst she fiddled."

"Who?"

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"Why, your mother to be sure, when she was Miss Eyton."

The boy's eyes sparkled eagerly.

"Did she play on this violin?"

"Yes, once or twice. Sir Aylmer bought it because she took a fancy to it when they heard some musician play upon it. The case was made in London. But it never belonged to her. It was one of the things—" And then Mrs. Mansfield stopped short and coughed.

Eyton, however, understood the meaning of the half-finished sentence.

"Poor Uncle Aylmer," he said softly. "I feel so sorry for him."

And then he came slowly to the table, and began to pour out his tea in an absent fashion.

"I'll study as hard as ever I can," he said to himself as the solitary meal proceeded, "and then perhaps when Uncle Aylmer comes home it will remind him of mother to hear me play, and he will love me a little for her sake. Oh, I do so want some one to love me again!" and he laid down his head and sobbed aloud, for the music had stirred him to the depths, and a wave of desolation seemed suddenly to rise up and overwhelm him. Why did every one die whom he loved? There was no one belonging to him in the wide world but the uncle whose love he feared he might never win.

And then the hound rose up from his place on the rug, and came and pushed up his great head under

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the child's hands, and Eyton clasped his arms round the dog's neck and felt comforted.

"Dear old King, what should I do without you? Please always love me, dear King, for there is hardly anybody else."

As the days went by, Eyton and his new treasure became more and more inseparable. The boy's passion for music seemed to awake with renewed force from the year's deprivation it had endured. He was hardly ever to be found without his precious violin in his hands; and had it not been for a strong strain of conscientiousness in his character, he would have neglected his own studies and those of Dick in the absorption of his new pursuit.

As it was, however, he conquered this temptation, and went on with praiseworthy steadiness with the tasks he had in hand. But all his leisure hours were devoted to music, and even Red Rover was in danger of being neglected, for his master could not always spare time to ride him.

Mr. Creighton sometimes remonstrated gently with his little friend on the danger of becoming too sedentary in his habits; but Eyton would plead that it was so hot to ride or walk, and that he got so tired if he went far, whilst he was always happy at home, weaving his own fancies into his music.

Certainly the boy appeared anything but robust, and Mr. Creighton was sometimes seriously uneasy about him. He seemed to have inherited his mother's

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sensitive organization and delicate constitution, and the life he led was plainly reacting unfavourably upon him.

The heat of the summer months told upon him in a way for which there appeared no adequate cause, and the dreaminess attendant upon his lonely life was steadily increasing. Mr. Creighton was the more uneasy about him, because he was leaving his rectory for some months during the autumn and winter, as his wife's health obliged them to winter in the Riviera. He had found a brother-clergyman glad to take his duties for a time; but it was not at all likely that Eyton would transfer his allegiance to him, or that he would take any special interest in the boy.

But before he left his home, in the middle of October, he wrote once again in a quietly urgent way to Sir Aylmer Desborough, telling him very frankly of the dangers that threatened his nephew and heir from the studied neglect he was suffering.

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X.

AN ADVENTURE.

IT was a cold, clear November afternoon, and Eyton was out on a ramble with King and Red Rover. These expeditions, half rides and half walks, pleased him better than anything else just now. He had exhausted all the regular roads by this time, and he knew the moors pretty well—at least such parts of them as Dick considered safe for riding, for there were tracts too much infested by rabbits to tempt horsemen. But the actual park-land and meadow and wood that lay around the old house, and was the property of his uncle, was much less well known to him; and when the days grew cold again, and he felt more disposed for active exercise, Eyton thought that he would make regular exploring expeditions all over the property, and find out all its ins and outs.

Red Rover was now so tame that he would follow at his little master's heels as steadily as King. Eyton had made a friend and companion of his horse from the very first; and though in the hot weather he had ridden but little, he had spent plenty of odd moments

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in the stable fondling his favourite, and had played games with him in field or paddock when he had been turned out to exercise himself.

So, when the ground grew too rough or bad for riding, or the trees too low or the brushwood too thick, Eyton would dismount and tie up the reins, and he and King would force a passage through; and Red Rover would meekly follow, trusting that his companions would not call upon him for any too difficult feat of scrambling.

There was something adventurous in these exploring expeditions that chimed in admirably with Eyton's habit of mind. He could weave them into the stories he was always enacting, and fancy himself a fugitive prince, a robber chieftain, a backwoodsman, or a knight of the round table, with equal facility. One thing only was certain—that he never was himself; for Eyton Desborough was a lonely boy, with no one to love or be loved by, and he could not endure to be "only himself;" but playing the *rôle* of one of his imaginary heroes took away all thoughts of his loneliness and desolation, and gave a new interest to life.

He had made several of these voyages of discovery already, and had never before met any human creature beyond a gamekeeper or a woodman, and he began to think that no one ever intruded into these woods and covers, until one day he had an encounter there, that at the time surprised him not a little.

A footpath ran through the wood he had selected

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as his haunt for this particular afternoon. Eyton did not know whither the path led, nor how far the "trackless forest" extended on either hand; but he was riding slowly along, keeping a sharp look-out right and left for the Red Indians with whom he had peopled this wood, when suddenly King growled and Red Rover pricked his ears, and the boy himself became aware of a figure in the narrow path a long way ahead —the figure of a man advancing leisurely towards him.

Now this surprised Eyton very much, because he never expected to meet any one out on his rambles, and because, knowing nothing about possible rights of way, he imagined that no stranger had any business on his uncle's property.

Eyton had plenty of time to think of all this as he rode slowly on, for the path was very straight indeed, and he saw the advancing figure a long time before he met it face to face.

He had time, therefore, to wonder what he should do—whether he should speak to the intruder and order him off; whether he should warn him that he was trespassing, but graciously allow him to proceed; or whether he should simply pass him by without any observation, bad or good.

As, however, the path was very narrow, it did not seem as if the last course would be possible. One party would have to make way for the other, and it would be almost impossible to pass by in utter silence. Eyton, with his head crammed full of romantic stories

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of adventure, quite longed for an encounter that should give scope for the display of courage or address. He hoped that if such a thing were to occur, he should comport himself with the dignity worthy of the noble name of Desborough.

He settled himself firmly in the saddle, tightened his grasp on reins and whip, sat upright as a dart, and next moment met the stranger face to face in the narrowest part of the path.

And it seemed as if his wish for something to happen was to be gratified; for just as they were approaching the stranger, King rushed suddenly forward and leaped upon him with a strange, hoarse cry unlike any noise Eyton had ever heard before.

He shouted to the dog to come back, half afraid he would fly at the man's throat; and the stranger uttered a word or two of authoritative command. The hound instantly recoiled, and crouched along the ground, trembling in every limb as if with excitement or fear, whilst his burning eyes seemed riveted upon the figure in the path.

Eyton's gaze turned likewise in the same direction, and he felt a curious sensation as he met the fixed glance of a pair of cold gray-blue eyes. He had a fancy that he had met the glance of those eyes before, and indeed there was something familiar in the whole cast of the countenance; but the likeness, if it were one, eluded him. He could not even remember of whom this man reminded him.

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The stranger stood still in the path, attempting neither to speak nor to move out of the way. Eyton, whose curiosity was piqued, determined to address him.

"I hope my dog did not hurt you?"

"Not at all, thank you," and the stranger smiled in rather a mocking way. "So he is your dog, is he?"

"Yes," answered Eyton, wondering what made the end of King's tail begin to wag as soon as the man began to speak. "At least, I suppose he is really my uncle's dog, but it seems as if he belonged to me now."

"And is that your pony too?"

"Yes; my uncle gave it to me."

"And is this your wood too, young gentleman?"

"No; but it belongs to my uncle. Perhaps you will not mind my telling you that you have really no right to be here. It isn't that I want to be disagreeable, but I believe my uncle is very particular."

Eyton did not think the intruder had any business to stand his ground quite so coolly.

"You seem to think an uncommon lot of your uncle. Are you very fond of him?"

Something in the mocking tone aroused Eyton's displeasure. He drew himself up rather stiffly.

"My uncle is Sir Aylmer Desborough. He is a very great man. If you were not quite a stranger in this part of the country you must have heard of him before."

"Indeed! so he is a very popular man round here,

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is he?" The sneer was so audible that the boy's cheek flamed.

"Every one who really knows him has the greatest respect for him," was the answer, spoken with great dignity. "If you have heard anything to the contrary, you have been greatly misinformed."

Eyton had got into the way of composing rather grandiloquent phrases in the course of his imaginary dialogues with emperors and sages; and he was pleased with the fine sound of his words, hoping they would produce the intended effect upon this strange and impertinent intruder.

"You seem mightily fond of this uncle of yours. I suppose he gives you plenty of things to buy your good word."

The boy's face glowed with indignation.

"Sir, you insult both my uncle and myself. He is far above such paltry motives. He is kind to me because it is his nature to be, and I love him for what he is."

The man uttered a short laugh which Eyton mentally defined as "sardonic." He had often read the adjective before, but had never till now understood what it meant.

"So he is kind to you, is he?"

"Yes, very kind," emphatically.

"And how does he show his kindness?"

If Eyton had been older he would have suspected some motive in this cross-questioning; but children

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seldom trouble their heads on such points, and any one who questions them with an air of authority gets answered almost as a matter of course.

"He lets me live in his house, and gives me anything I want. He gave me this pony; it was he, and nobody else, who thought of it. I don't know what would have become of me if it hadn't been for my uncle. I don't know why you stand and look as if you did not believe a word I say."

"Very kind, is he? Has you a great deal with him, I suppose? Makes quite a companion of you, eh?"

"My uncle is travelling in the East at present. He is not at the Court."

"And when is he coming back?"

"I don't know."

"Aren't you pining for a sight of him?"

"I wish very much he would come home, if that is what you mean."

"When did he leave home?"

"A good many years ago."

"And how long have you been living in his house?"

"About a year."

"Then you have never seen him?"

"No."

The stranger smiled mockingly. "Ah! that accounts for it perhaps."

Eyton felt unreasonably angry, though he hardly knew why; his face was very hot.

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"I don't think I understand what you mean, sir."

"You have never heard the proverb, I suppose, that 'distance lends enchantment'?"

"I fail to see the bearing of the remark."

Again came that grim-sounding laugh.

"Indeed! Upon my word you are a very magniloquent young man, and would have done credit to the Johnsonian period. Altogether your habit of mind seems a little out of date in the present day. You don't see the bearing of my remark, don't you? Perhaps some day soon you will see it better."

"I think if you will kindly permit me I will ride on," said Eyton loftily. "It hardly seems as if we should be likely to agree. As I have before told you, this is not public property, and you have no right to be here; but if, after the way you have been pleased to speak of Sir Aylmer Desborough, you *like* to trespass on his land, I shall not stop you. *He* would scorn to take any notice of such petty insults;" and with a glance of withering scorn, Eyton turned Red Rover out of the narrow path and left the stranger standing there.

"Good-afternoon, young Hotspur Percy. Possibly we may meet again some other day."

The indolent mockery of the tone increased Eyton's irritation.

"If you persistently trespass upon Sir Aylmer's property, perhaps we may; but in that case I shall probably lodge information against you with the

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keepers. The Desboroughs are not fond of the intrusion of strangers of doubtful character. Good-day, I have no more to say."

"No? Well, certainly your eloquence is beyond your years. It is well to find it has a limit."

Eyton attempted no reply; but he was very angry, and he was not soothed from his displeasure by the strange conduct of King. That most faithful of hounds seemed for once shaken in his allegiance; for instead of following Red Rover and his youthful master, he stood stock still in the narrow path, gazing at the retreating figure of the stranger, and looking much more disposed to follow him.

"King! come here," called out Eyton in some displeasure; but at first the dog only wagged his tail, whilst he took a few steps in the direction of the trespasser, uttering at the same time a low uneasy whine.

"King! what do you mean? Come here directly."

The authoritative tone brought the dog, though reluctantly, to his side.

"What is the matter, King? What makes you so strange? You do not seem angry with him, or I should understand you better. You must not take fancies to strange people like that. It is not at all proper. I thought you had more sense."

King drooped his tail at the reproof, but he still seemed uneasy in his mind, and did not recover his usual demeanour all the rest of the ride.

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Eyton turned over this adventure many times in his mind, and sincerely hoped that he had got the better of his antagonist, and had sufficiently vindicated his uncle's honour. He was indignant every time he recalled the stranger's sneering looks and words, and would have been better pleased if he could have been certain that the snubs he tried to administer had been taken in the right spirit.

Eyton came to the conclusion that it was not very easy for children to put down grown-up men, and he sighed and felt aggrieved, for he knew that if they had met on equal terms, or in "medieval times," he would have been fairly credited with the victory.

Two days later—during which days he had not caught even a passing glimpse of the stranger, though he was always on the look-out for him—as he rode about dusk into the stable-yard, he was greatly astonished by the appearance of an old-fashioned post-chaise with four horses, standing there with some big boxes on the top.

He knew that the post-chaise belonged to the county town twelve miles away, but he could not imagine what had brought it there, and was exceedingly amazed and excited.

Dick was nowhere to be seen, so he backed Red Rover into his stall, and fastened him to the pillar reins, eager to rush indoors and question Mrs. Mansfield. Before he had left the stable, however, Dick and the driver of the chaise appeared, took down the

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boxes from the top, and proceeded to drag them into the house.

Eyton, his heart beating with the excitement of a hope he dared not put into words, rushed into the house full speed.

"O Mrs. Mansfield!" he cried, bursting into the kitchen, "what is it? Who has come?"

Mrs. Mansfield had that air of worry and discomfort upon her commonly described as "flurry." Her cap was awry, her cheeks were flushed, she was stirring about with a great clatter, but in an aimless kind of way, as if she did not know what to turn her hand to first. As Eyton tumbled in she gave a great start.

"Come? I should think so! Come without even so much as one of them nasty yellow telegrams! I never did know such a man. He grows worse and worse. If it wasn't that he'd brought that steady fellow Bunyard with him, who has some sense in his head, I'd be fair distracted. I'm pretty well on the way to it now."

"But who has come?" cried Eyton breathlessly.

"Who? Why, the master to be sure! Who else would dream of coming in such a fashion as this to a shut up house?"

"My uncle!" ejaculated Eyton, and for a moment his heart seemed almost to stand still.

"I always did say he was the most ill-considerate man in the world, and now I know it. A nice trick

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to play a body, turning up like this; and as ill as he can be, too, to get about at all."

"Is he ill?" questioned the boy.

"So his man says. He's so dried up and shrivelled that I can't express no opinion on the point. He's been pretty nigh at death's door with some outlandish fever they catches in those nasty, dirty, furren parts. Serves 'em right for going there, when they've got a good house waiting for them at home. He's got patched up a bit in the journey home; but he's just as rickety as he can be, well some days and sick others, and as cross and crotchety, I'll be bound, as only men-folk know how to be. There, I'm that put about as I don't know what I'm at. 'Strong soup without a particle of grease.' I suppose he thinks strong soup grows all hot on the bushes. And Jane all took up with airing beds and bedding; and I don't know now if there's a room can be got ready in time. It's a real mercy we had the library all warmed and ready to hand, else I don't know what we would have done."

Mrs. Mansfield appeared ready to talk on for ever. Eyton had to get in his questions as best he could, by popping them in when she paused to take breath.

"Is he in the library now?"

"Why, yes, child. Where else could he be? Do you suppose we should pop him down the well?"

"May I go and see him?"

"Bless you, child, how should I know? I'd not go

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near him if I could help it. I know what sick men are like."

"But he might wonder if I didn't. He knows I am here. Has he asked anything about me?"

"Not he; he cares for nobody but himself. He isn't like to ask any questions."

This was not very encouraging, but Eyton's curiosity was great—greater even than his fear.

"I should like to go if I might."

"Oh, don't ask me. I don't know nothing. If you like to put your head in a lion's mouth, it isn't no particular business of mine that I know of. Now, run away, do, there's a good boy, for I'm that *druv* I don't know which way to turn; and when you'll get your tea to-night, goodness only knows."

"Oh, never mind my tea," answered Eyton cheerfully; "don't bother about that to-night, Mrs. Mansfield. If I'm hungry, I'll forage in the larder for myself by-and-by."

"Well, well, do so then, child; it's a comfort you take after your father, not your uncle. Master Philip he never gave one thousandth part the trouble his brother did. But run away now, do; and don't you go to the library unless you want to. There's no need unless you wish. He'll never ask for you—never."

So Eyton departed in a state of subdued excitement, and encountered Dick in the hall.

"Is he in there?" he asked breathlessly, pointing to the library door.

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Dick nodded.

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, just; but he was so muffled up in wraps one couldn't but get a glimpse."

"May I go in?"

Dick hesitated, and looked doubtful.

"You must please yourself as to that, sir; it isn't my place to give orders to you."

Eyton looked longingly at the door. He was greatly excited, and his colour came and went.

"I do so want to see him. Do you think he would be angry?"

"Can't say, sir, I'm sure. He's an odd kind of gentleman, you know."

At this moment King, who had leisurely followed his little master to the hall, became suddenly and violently excited. He began snuffing round the front door and passages, and then with a great bay of excited joy he tore across the polished floor and precipitated himself against the library door. It gave way before him, and the next moment he was heard making demonstrations of great joy within. This decided Eyton.

"I shall go in and see my uncle," he said, and walked firmly forward.

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XI.

SIR AYLMER.

THE library looked much as usual, only that a huge fire of logs was blazing on the hearth, and two shaded lamps stood upon the tables. As the room was very large the light was not sufficient to illuminate more than a portion of it, and the spot where Eyton stood was in deep shadow. He could see, however, the semi-recumbent figure in the great arm-chair beside the fire, and watch the movement of the thin, white hand that rested absently on King's huge head.

Sir Aylmer's face was in deep shadow, and his whole figure was so muffled in rugs that it looked more like a mummy than anything else. Eyton could hear the quick, hard breathing of the invalid, and he felt a sudden misgiving lest his uncle should be really ill. Mrs. Mansfield's sharply-spoken phrases had only left a confused impression on his mind. He had gathered from her manner that there was not much amiss. Had there been, he thought, she would not have seemed so cross.

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Eyton was greatly excited, though he gave no outward sign. The thought that he was actually in the presence of his uncle—the uncle who had been so long the hero of his dreams, the ideal of his childish imaginings—caused his heart to beat and his throat to swell, whilst his hands clasped themselves tightly together. How would he be received? What would be said to him? Should he risk a rebuff, or should he steal away unseen and await a better opportunity? Eyton felt that a harsh word from his uncle would almost break his heart; yet he could not keep away —he must see and speak to him at all cost.

He advanced slowly till he stood well within the radius of the firelight. The figure in the chair had not moved a muscle.

"How are you, uncle?" he asked in a voice he tried hard to keep steady. "I am very glad you have come home."

For what seemed quite a long time there was no answer, and when Eyton first heard the mocking tones of his uncle's voice he started with a feeling of dismay:—

"So this is the champion of the Desboroughs!"

The boy's eyes were growing used to the dim light. He began to distinguish the features of the man in the chair—the pinched, withered-looking face with the cold gray-blue eyes that had seemed familiar when last he had seen them, though he did not then know why.

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"You are the man I met in the wood," he said slowly; and he felt confused and dismayed, for he had disliked that man very much.

"Your penetration does you credit. I warned you we should meet again."

"You were not ill then."

"Perhaps I shall not be ill to-morrow. That is the beauty of my complaint. It is full of surprises. You cannot think what a pleasant companion it makes of me. It is no wonder my presence is so yearned after here."

Eyton hardly knew what response he was expected to make. His thoughts were all in a whirl. How was he to combine with his former mental pictures of his great and noble uncle the reality presented by this sneering, shrunken form and face? He had indulged such wild flights of fancy about Sir Aylmer, and was this to be all? But it was his turn to speak, and he must say something.

"Can I do anything for you, uncle?"

The reply was quite sharply spoken.

"You can hold your tongue and keep quiet. I am in no mood for chatter."

For a moment Eyton felt so chilled that he almost decided on quitting the room at once; but curiosity getting the better of disappointment, he decided in the end to stand his ground, so he quietly crossed the hearth-rug and took an arm-chair exactly opposite his uncle's.

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No notice was taken of this movement. Sir Aylmer sat still in his chair, his hand resting languidly on the head of the hound. The fire suddenly blazed up more brightly and flickered over his face. For the first time Eyton had the opportunity of studying his uncle's appearance, and of drawing comparisons between that and his ideal.

The face he had seen in the wood had filled him with a feeling of annoyance and disgust. He had many times since recalled its traits, and each time with the conviction that they must belong to a very "horrid man." Now he was eager to recant this opinion, and he studied the wan, sharp face before him with the closest scrutiny.

Certainly it bore little likeness to the oil-painting hanging on the wall above. Indeed, but for the shape of the brow and nose and the colour of the eyes, hardly a trace of the young man's face remained. Yet the baronet was not old in years. He should have been in the prime of life. He was barely forty-five, though he looked sixty.

His hair was grizzled and thin, the skin of his face was bleached and yellow, and there were hollows at his temples, and his features were greatly wasted. The thin-lipped mouth seemed to wear a habitual mocking sneer; yet notwithstanding many drawbacks there was something in the face that attracted, though it would have been difficult to define wherein the attraction lay. Was it the underlying sadness of the

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expression, or was it the look of confirmed ill-health, that evoked pity, and with pity a species of affection?

Sir Aylmer certainly looked very ill that night, as he lay back with closed eyes in the deep easy-chair he occupied. Eyton felt his own eyes fill with tears as he looked, and with a sudden rebound, all the stronger from the temporary check, the old feeling of loving devotion toward his uncle came surging back upon him, and he felt that he had never understood the half of his greatness or goodness before.

The impulses of a child's heart are oddly irrational, but at least they are absolutely sincere, and are a source of great happiness to those that experience them, even if the object remains untouched.

Such a warm glow of love and happiness came over Eyton as he had not known for many a long weary day. His uncle had come home—home to stay, as he firmly believed; and he should see and be with him constantly. What happiness there was in the thought of being again surrounded by an atmosphere of love! It was so long since he had known any daily companionship except that of servants, and he was pining for a change without knowing it.

But fortunately for himself Eyton was very quiet and undemonstrative. He was modest too, and did not expect his uncle to care about him—at any rate, in the first instance. His hope was to win his love by degrees—to be loved for the sake of his mother. He began to understand a little why people were

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rather afraid of his uncle; but he was not at all afraid himself, and the longer he sat and studied the wan face before him, the less afraid did he feel.

Presently a strange man-servant came in with quiet tread, and began noiselessly laying a small table, which he placed at his master's elbow.

Sir Aylmer took no notice until the food was actually on the table, and then he said, without so much as opening his eyes,—

"Take it away, Bunyard. I can eat nothing at all to-night."

"I am afraid you are in pain, sir," said the man, with respectful solicitude.

"Yes, and am likely to be so indefinitely, as your favourite physician has put his veto on the use of that sedative. Take it all away. The very smell of it sickens me."

"You should try to eat, sir. You will run down if you do not take your food. The doctor was most particular that you should keep up your strength, more especially as the treatment was changed and you were sure to feel it."

"Very kind of him," murmured Sir Aylmer, without moving a muscle.

"Well, sir, I'll leave it with you. Perhaps you'll take a fancy to it later on. It won't do to starve yourself; and the attack will pass off all the quicker if you can make up your mind to your food;" and Bunyard stole quietly from the room, leaving the table

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and its burden close beside his master's chair. He never so much as looked Eyton's way, and was quite unconscious of the little, curled-up figure on the other side of the hearth.

Sir Aylmer never moved when his man had gone. His eyes were still closed, and there were deeper lines round them and round his mouth. The thought that his uncle was ill and suffering touched the child to his heart's core. He sat still for a few minutes, and then got up and went over to him.

"Uncle Aylmer, I am *so* sorry. Please, will you let me feed you? Then you can keep quite still, and need not even move. When my mother was ill I used often to feed her. She said I did it very nicely, and indeed I haven't forgotten how."

There was not a word or a sign of response, but Eyton took silence for consent, and uncovered the soup preparatory to feeding the invalid. But the next moment the spoon was taken quickly from him, and Sir Aylmer sat up and spoke in sharp, peremptory fashion,—

"Do you take me for a baby or an idiot? In my young days children were taught to mind their own business, and keep their proper place."

Then he took the basin of soup and began to eat in a quick, irritable way.

Eyton drew back a little, but he was not so much crushed by the rebuff as some children would have been. He had seen a good deal of military life, with

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its sharp dictatorial ways and words that did not imply any real harshness; besides, his uncle was in pain, and he knew that often made people speak sharply.

He was glad, at any rate, to see the soup disappear; and when it seemed as if the invalid had eaten as much as he could, the little boy stepped forward and took the basin and put it back on the table.

"Will you have a glass of wine now? The cork is drawn. I can pour it out without spilling, I am sure."

He was as good as his word, and the baronet took the glass in silence and drained its contents at one draught.

"That will do you good," said Eyton, who looked upon wine as a very nasty kind of physic. "Would you like anything else now? Mrs. Mansfield makes *such* nice Welsh-rabbit."

Sir Aylmer, however, had subsided to his old position and made no response.

"You look very tired," said Eyton, with solicitude. "I'll just go and see how they're getting on with your bedroom. You see you took us by surprise, and nothing was ready; but if you're at all afraid of a chill, you shall have the mattress of my bed. I *know* that's dry, because I've slept on it for a year. When I came here first I had to sleep on a sofa, because I wasn't expected and there was no bed aired; but it would never do for *you* to sleep on a sofa, and you can have my bed brought down quite well. I sleep

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up in the nurseries. I wonder what room you will have?"

And as his uncle said nothing, Eyton slipped quietly off to see if proper preparations were being made for the reception of the master.

To his great surprise he saw as he left the library that the door of the small drawing-room was open, that a huge fire was blazing there, and that bedding was laid out in front of it. His surprise was still greater when he became aware that one of the great four-poster beds from upstairs had been taken to pieces and brought down, and Dick and the coachman, who was still in the house, were getting it put together again there.

A writing-table had been turned into a washing-stand, and a toilet table had been brought down and placed in one of the curtained windows. Already the room seemed transformed into a bed-chamber; and Eyton, seeing Jane hard at work removing from it such ornaments of glass and china as seemed superfluous and out of place, lent her willing aid.

As they deposited their burden of pretty trifles on the large drawing-room table, and began making room for them on cabinet and shelf, Eyton asked why his uncle was going to sleep downstairs.

"Oh, how should I know, child? I'm just druv to death. One of his furren fads, aunt calls it—she never could stand outlandish ways. I don't know what we are to do if he stays on. Mr. Bunyard, he's

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a gentleman himself almost; and the master he do look mortal bad, and sick folks are a power of trouble. But there, I can't stand chattering all day. I've a sight of things to do."

Jane hurried away, and Eyton went back to the bedroom. The bed was up by this time, and the coachman was dragging in the boxes. Presently he was paid and dismissed, and Bunyard, taking out his keys, began to unlock the trunks and unpack their contents.

"Can I help you?" asked Eyton civilly.

The man turned quickly, for he had not been aware of the presence of the child. Eyton's movements were always quiet, and they had been quite lost in the general turmoil.

"Is it Master Desborough?" asked the man with a look of interest.

"Yes, I am Eyton Desborough. My uncle lets me live here, you know. I should like to help you to get things straight if I could."

After some slight demur, Bunyard consented to be assisted by the young gentleman, and Eyton worked with great zeal at emptying out a large oak press or cabinet, which made a capital repository for clothes. He offered his own bed for the use of either the baronet or his man, and was almost disappointed to find it would not be required. He found the valet very easy to talk to, however, and when they were quietly at work arranging the shelves of the big press

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he ventured to put more pointed questions than he had attempted at first.

"I hope you have come to settle down here. Do you think my uncle means to stay?"

"Well, sir, the master is none too fond of making plans, but my opinion is as he will have to make a pretty considerable stay whether he wants to or not."

"Why?"

"Because he isn't in no wise fit to do any more travelling yet a while."

"Is he very ill?" asked Eyton, pausing in his task with a look of solicitude.

"He's been ill this long while; but he isn't of the stuff that gives up easy, and he would take no manner of notice of warnings. About this time last year he had one of his worst attacks, and was ordered off home; but instead of that he would go to Egypt, and instead of resting when he got there, nothing would serve him but to go up country after our troops, to see the captain, your father, sir. And when he was brought in wounded, he never left him night or day till the end, though the doctors all warned him that he stayed at the risk of his life."

Eyton's heart swelled, and two big tears dropped upon the vest he was carrying. He did not attempt to speak; only a sense of proud, grateful gladness filled his soul, and he kept repeating to himself,—

"I thought so—I said so. It is just like Uncle

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Aylmer. Oh, how glad I am that he was with papa when he died!"

Presently Bunyard went on speaking, for it was something of a luxury to him to have a listener who was pleased to hear him speak of his master.

"I did think then, when all was over, that he would come home; but though he started, he couldn't make up his mind to it. We went to India instead, and there he got hold of a kind of medicine-drug that seemed to do him good; but a month or two ago he was warned so seriously to leave hot climates and a wandering life, and settle down at home, that he made up his mind he would. And here we are at last, and I only hope it isn't too late."

"Oh no!" cried Eyton, "oh no! It can't be too late. Why, only a few days ago he was walking in the woods. I met him there. He can't be so *very* ill."

"Ah yes, some days he can do a good bit, and then other days he can scarce move hand or foot. It depends how it takes him. He's seen a learned English doctor in London who understands such cases as his better perhaps than anybody, and he tells him that if he will lead a very quiet life, and give up altogether the use of that drug, he may live for years yet; but then the question is, will he?"

"Oh, but he is going to, you know," Eyton answered eagerly. "You see he has come here, and he will keep very quiet, and I heard him say he would not take those drops any more. He told you so himself."

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"Yes, I know he means to give them up; but it will be pretty hard to keep to his resolution when the pain grows upon him, as for a long time it will. He's not been a man to deny himself anything, you see, being alone in the world, with only himself to think for, and plenty of money to gratify his wishes. He isn't broken in, as one may say, to self-denial, and it comes hard on a man to change his ways when they've become second nature."

Eyton, who had listened with great interest to all this, now drew himself up proudly.

"But my uncle is Sir Aylmer Desborough. He is not like other people. He would always keep to what he had resolved, even if it were hard. You ought to know that better than I."

Bunyard smiled a little.

"Well, sir, the Desboroughs have always good strong wills of their own, and my master he has passed his word to take no more of it, so I'm in hopes he may be able to keep from it; but it will be harder than you can understand, young gentleman. He has grown to depend on it for his night's rest, and the best part of his hours of ease and comfort."

"But I am sure he will keep his promise," asserted Eyton eagerly. "Oh! I am *quite sure* of that."

Presently he asked another question:—

"Why does my uncle sleep down here? Is it because he is ill?"

"Well, yes, in part it is. Some days he finds the

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stairs a trouble, and he's a man that cannot bear to keep his bed. He must get up and into another room, however bad he be. So the only way of making him comfortable is to get him rooms on one level. I thought he'd have taken to be upstairs altogether; but no, he will be down here. He took a fancy to the library from seeing it warm and cheerful when he arrived, and there he means to live, and here he means to sleep. It will be handy for him when he is well enough to walk out, but it's rather dreary for other things."

"I like the library. I sit there a great deal. I wonder if Uncle Aylmer will mind my coming in when he is there?"

Bunyard looked the boy over from head to foot.

"Well, sir, there's no telling what will please Sir Aylmer when he's in his moods. You can but try. He isn't used to much company but his own; but then maybe he is getting rather tired of that. You must do as you think best about that, sir."

At this moment Mrs. Mansfield's voice was heard at the door asking for Master Eyton.

"Bless the child! he would starve himself and be none the wiser for it, I do believe, once he gets an idea into his head. Now run upstairs—there's a good boy. Jane is taking up a bit of supper, and you had better go to bed when you have had it. We're too busy down here to have children racketing about."

And as Eyton disappeared in obedience to the hint—

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for he was really hungry by this time, though he had not thought about it so far—she turned to Bunyard and said,—

"I'm main afraid what the master will say to him. He's the very image of his poor mamma, though he's a true Desborough too; and he's that set on his uncle, as he thinks there's no one in the world like him. It goes against me to see him disappointed and took up short; but if I'm not mistaken, Sir Aylmer won't be able to bear setting eyes on the child."

"Ah well, we shall see. Sir Aylmer seldom takes a thing in the way folks expect."

Mrs. Mansfield drew a step nearer.

"It seems to me that the master has got death in his face. I never saw any one so changed."

"He has been very ill, and still is, but I'm in hopes that English air will set him up yet."

But Mrs. Mansfield shook her head. In common with the rest of her class, she took a strange pleasure in gloomy prognostication.

"I never see'd a creature live long who looks as the master does now. I've just been into him, thinking as the boy might have ventured in, and it fairly gave me a turn, that it did. Oh, there's death in that face, if ever there was in any one's. I wonder you can't see it plain for yourself, Mr. Bunyard."

"I've seen him much worse times and again, and then he'll be better for a long spell. 'A creaking door hangs long,' the proverb says."

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"Ay, and 'tis a long lane that has no turning,'" retorted Mrs. Mansfield, not quite certain of the bearing of her remark, but resolved to cap one proverb with another. "Anyway, the longest life is bound to come to an end some day; and when Sir Aylmer's turn comes, that lad will step into his shoes. He knows that as well as I do, and I am main afraid he will not be able to bear the sight of the child."

"We shall see, we shall see," was Bunyard's sage reply, and there the subject dropped.

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XII.

EYTON'S DECISION.

"HOW is my uncle?" was Eyton's eager question, as he descended to the kitchen next morning contrary to his usual custom. But he was too excited to wait quietly upstairs as usual; besides he did not exactly know what was to be the order of the day now, and he had some faint hope that he and his uncle would breakfast together.

Mrs. Mansfield was standing over the fire, making something that Eyton took for a pancake.

"He's had no rest all night, Mr. Bunyard says, and I don't expect he's very pleasant company this morning. He's sent down an omelet already for being burnt, though 'twas only one tiny corner that caught the fire; and Mr. Bunyard makes his coffee himself in an outlandish little stove thing, or else his master would never drink it, he says. We're going to have fine times of it now, I can see. But he's the master, and he's a sick man, so we must make allowances. Men is but poor things at best; they never know how to be ill."

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Eyton had the rejected omelet for his breakfast, and found it very good. Then he visited Red Rover in his stable, and told him the news; after which he wandered about a little while in the garden, for it was a mild, sunny morning and pleasant out of doors. But he missed King's company, and wondered what had taken the hound away, for he had never failed before to join him at the stable, even if he had not found his way upstairs earlier in the day. He supposed King had gone to see Sir Aylmer, and had stayed with him, and after a little hesitation Eyton resolved to follow his example.

By this time the stable clock was striking ten, and the boy approached the library by the terrace path that lay in front of the windows. When he had reached the first, he paused and pressed his face against the glass. Yes, his uncle was there, in the same chair he had occupied last night. Eyton unlatched the casement and walked in.

"Good-morning, uncle. Are you any better? I am so sorry you have had a bad night."

There was no response. Sir Aylmer was lying back in his chair with closed eyes, and his face looked more than ever like yellow parchment. King lay on the floor at his feet, and flopped his tail vigorously at the sound of his little master's voice. Eyton sat down beside him on the rug, and took the animal's head on his knee.

He sat silent for a good while, following out his

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own train of thought, and presently he asked a question :—

"Uncle Aylmer, when you and papa were little boys and lived here, did King belong to you or to him ?"

At first it seemed as if there were to be no answer to this question; but Eyton waited very patiently, and presently the weary eyes unclosed.

"He was given to us both when he was a puppy; he was the last of the old race of Desborough blood-hounds. Your father was a lad, and made a great deal of him and trained him; but when he left home so much the creature attached itself to me. He seems to have an excellent memory. It is a good thing human beings are not all blessed in the same way."

All this was spoken very slowly, and with long pauses, but Eyton drank in every word.

"Why ?" he asked at the conclusion.

"It would be a bad thing for some of us, if we could not forget."

"Do you forget much ?"

A sort of spasm crossed the invalid's face.

"As for that," he said slowly, "I am not so good at it as some people are."

It was almost like one of the child's old dreams to be sitting there and talking to his uncle at will. Eyton forgot all past fears and misgivings, and pulling gently at King's silky ears, he began to give utterance to his feelings.

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"I think I am rather glad that you don't forget, uncle, because there are so many things I want to ask you about. Let me see now. I will count them up on my fingers," and he proceeded to do so very gravely. "First, I want to know all about you and papa, and what you both did when you were little boys. And then I want to know about mamma, and how pretty she was, and how fond you were of her, and every single thing you can tell me about her. Then I want to know all about where you have been when you have been travelling, and the things you saw and did. And then I want to know—" Here Eyton stopped suddenly short, and it was a long time before he finished his sentence:—"I want to know about my father, and how you went to him in Egypt when he was dying, and what he said, and if he sent any message to me."

It was with an effort that Eyton got out these last words, for the thought of his father dying away in that far-off land always brought the tears into his eyes and a lump in his throat.

He did not look up at his uncle after he had spoken, and so he started as he heard the sharp sound of the little hand-gong that always stood at Sir Aylmer's right hand.

Bunyard came quickly in answer to the summons.

"Take that child away," was the curt command. "He tires me."

Bunyard gave the boy a look, and Eyton slowly

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rose to his feet with flaming cheeks and smarting eyes, and followed the man out of the room; but it was with a feeling of profound humiliation, for why had his uncle not told him to go? Why had he called a servant to eject him?

The man seemed to divine the boy's mortification, and when they stood outside the door, he said kindly,—

"Never you mind, young sir; it's only the master's odd way. He never does things like other folks, but he don't mean no harm. He's never at his best of a morning, least of all after such a bad night as he's had."

"If he had told me he did not want to talk, I would have gone away," said Eyton. "I thought perhaps he was dull all alone. I am dull sometimes, and then I like somebody to come in and talk to me."

"He'll like it too, maybe, by-and-by. But he's a bit distracted this morning, and there are so many things about the house to set him thinking. He isn't quite himself, you see. It's an odd thing to come back to a home when you've been ten years and more away, and when so many things have happened in between."

So Eyton let himself be a little consoled, but it was not for some little time that he ventured again into his uncle's presence. He spent the rest of that day wandering about the house, thinking of Sir

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Aylmer, and longing for a summons to his room, which summons never came. He did not even care to ride Red Rover, lest his uncle should send for him when he was out; and as Dick was too busy for his usual lesson, and Mrs. Mansfield was in the state she described as "druv," he was more lonely than ever all that day, and went to bed in a decidedly depressed state.

Next day things appeared to be no better. Eyton hung about the downstair doors, and tried to get a glimpse at his uncle, but he did not succeed in his attempt; and Bunyard looked grave and worried, and told the boy that Sir Aylmer appeared worse, and was in severe pain, which none of the new medicines did anything to relieve. The faithful servant was plainly much afraid that the invalid would insist on returning to the use of the drug which was so bad for him in other ways. He advised Eyton not to attempt to go into the room, as his master was in no mood for conversation.

About three o'clock the boy saw Dick harnessing old Dobbin to the spring-cart, and going down to the stable-yard to inquire what was going on, he was told that Mr. Bunyard wished to be driven into the town to get some things that Sir Aylmer desired to have in case of need.

Eyton watched them drive away, and then wandered indoors, finding his way as if by instinct to the hall, and to the half-open library door. Inside the door

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was a tall screen that effectually concealed the greater part of the room from the view of any one standing just within. Eyton thought that he would take up his post there until Bunyard's return. His uncle was ill, and might need something; and the chances were that he would be unable to make any one hear if he called or rang his gong ever so loudly.

The child leaned silently against the door-post, and waited patiently. For a long time the room was so intensely still that he fancied the patient slept; but presently a low, deep groan, that spoke of weariness and pain, smote upon his ears, making him start and tremble. Another groan, and he could stand it no longer, but advanced noiselessly into the room.

"Can I do anything for you, uncle? Are you wanting anything?"

Slowly the dim eyes unclosed and fixed themselves upon the child's earnest face. A sort of spasm crossed the countenance of the sick man.

"Madelaine, is it you?" he said very faintly.

Eyton was perplexed and a little frightened. Madelaine had been his mother's name, but he did not think of that. He had no idea how like his face was just at this moment to the pictured face on the wall. Something in the look of his eyes was strangely like his mother's, and Sir Aylmer's own were dim with faintness and want of sleep.

"I am your nephew, Eyton Desborough," he said slowly and distinctly. "I am so sorry you are ill.

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Bunyard has gone out, and I don't like you to be alone. May I sit with you till he comes back?"

"If you like."

Delighted with this permission, Eyton took a stool and sat down near the hearth. He put the fire together with a few skilful touches, and watched the dancing flames for a good while in silence; then he turned and looked at his uncle, wondering if he might talk a little to him.

But when he saw the look upon his face, he felt sure that the pain was very bad, and though Eyton did not know much about pain himself, he was very tender-hearted, and could not bear to see any one suffer. So he got up, and came and stood close to Sir Aylmer's chair.

"Uncle, can't I do anything for you?"

There was no answer.

"Isn't there anything I can get to make you better?"

Suddenly the patient's eyes unclosed; a new look passed into the wan face. The man stirred a little in his chair, and raised himself slightly.

"Well, yes, I think there is something," he said at length, a look of settled purpose coming over him. "We will try at all events. Do you know the room I sleep in, boy?"

"Yes, uncle."

"And do you know a small walnut-wood, brass-bound chest that stands on the top of a low book-case between the windows?"

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"I've seen it, uncle."

Sir Aylmer took a bunch of keys from his pocket, and selected a small one with complex wards.

"Go to that little chest and unlock a drawer at the bottom. In the drawer you will find a blue fluted bottle half full. Bring it to me."

Eyton, delighted to be made useful, ran off on his errand, and quickly found what was desired. He locked up the medicine chest again, and was running eagerly back with the bottle, when a sudden unwelcome thought presented itself, and caused him to stop short in the middle of the room.

Could it be that this bottle contained the soothing medicine that Sir Aylmer had been ordered not to take, and which he had promised to give up? Could it be that he was taking advantage of Bunyard's absence to obtain a dose of the drug which his servant would be loath to administer?

The doubt seemed treason, yet it would present itself, and Eyton trembled with dismayed distress. The very bottle itself was labelled "Poison." Could he be doing right in taking it to his uncle?

But then perhaps he was not going to drink it. It might be only a lotion or something of that kind. Eyton's courage and hopefulness returned at that thought, and he went back to the library with the bottle in his hand.

"Is this it, uncle?"

"Yes; give it to me."

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"Can't I pour it out for you? I am very careful."

"Very well. I daresay your hand is steadier than mine. You see that measuring glass on the table? Well, take it and pour thirty drops into it—that is about half a teaspoonful. You will see by the figures where to stop. Then fill it with water and bring it to me."

"Are you going to drink it?"

"It is usual to drink physic, is it not?"

A deep flush had overspread Eyton's face. He put the bottle down on the table, and took a step towards the patient, his hands closely locked together.

"Uncle," he said breathlessly, "is that the medicine that the clever doctor said you were not to take?"

Sir Aylmer's face contracted sharply.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Please don't be angry, uncle. I daresay it isn't. Indeed I'm almost sure it isn't, because I *know* you would never break your promise. Only it came into my head, and I just asked. Please, forgive me."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Sir Aylmer with a sombre glance.

"I heard Bunyard talking; he talks to Mrs. Mansfield, and sometimes to me. I heard about the drops you took to make you better, but which really made you worse, and how you had promised not to take any more—"

"Servants'-hall gossip!" muttered the baronet with his cold sneer. "A fine thing truly for the heir of

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the Desboroughs to have nothing better to listen to than servants' chatter!"

"You see there is nobody else to talk to except you, uncle, and you only came two days ago," was the ingenuous reply. "And your servants are particularly nice."

"Are you going to give me my medicine?"

"Oh, it is your medicine, is it?" cried Eyton, relieved. "I am so sorry I ever thought it was those drops. It was very stupid of me, because, of course, I ought to have known that *you* would never break a promise. I told Bunyard so."

"And what did he say?"

"I don't quite remember. I know he made me rather angry. He didn't seem so sure as I was; and he *ought* to have been surer."

"Why?"

"Because he knew you better. But then he evidently didn't understand you. Perhaps it is because he doesn't think about you so much as I do."

Sir Aylmer's eyes were fixed upon the boy's absorbed face.

"You've only known me two days. You can't have thought about me long."

"Oh, but I began as soon as I got here. I think about you every day. When I read about men like Bayard—without fear and without reproach—I always think of you. That's why I wanted so much to know you. I wanted to know a man who was

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really great—really a hero. And for any one to talk as if *you* would break your promise—it made me very angry."

By this time the thirty drops were accurately measured, and the water had been duly added.

"Here is your medicine," said Eyton, advancing with the glass. "Will it make the pain better?"

"It will, if I take it?"

"Then please do take it quickly, for I am sure you are very bad."

It did not need an experienced eye to detect this, for Sir Aylmer's face was ghastly, more like the face of a corpse than of a living man. Only the eyes were calm and clear, and his voice was well under control though very low. Eyton gave him the glass, and waited impatiently to see him take the dose; but he set it untasted on the table.

"Won't you drink it? Is it very nasty? But it can't be worse than the pain. I can't bear to see your face look like that—please take it."

"And break my promise? Shall I purchase ease at the cost of my word?"

Eyton suddenly started, and drew back dismayed.

"Is it *that* medicine?"

"Yes;" and though the man was struggling to keep back all outward manifestations of suffering, it was betrayed by an involuntary convulsion of his features. Eyton saw it, and wrung his hands together.

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"Isn't there anything else?"

"No."

"Oh, uncle, what shall you do?"

The blue-gray eyes regarded him steadily.

"You shall decide that, boy. It is you who have made the hero of me. Which will you choose for me — a broken promise and a little ease, or this?"

Poor Eyton looked round him in great distress. He had never known before the difficulty of making choice between duty and love. He would have given anything in the world to see his uncle eased of that dreadful pain—but for him to break his word!

"Oh, please, uncle, don't make me decide—it is so hard!" he pleaded.

"Then what is it for me?"

Eyton tried to think, and his distress increased.

"Well, have you decided yet?" The words were pronounced with some difficulty.

"Oh, uncle, I don't know what to say—only—only I can't help thinking about what my father used to say about people who were brave, and who 'overcame,' and the beautiful things that are waiting for them. And you are so brave and so good, and—and —oh, uncle, please do not break your promise. Please do not drink it!"

Sir Aylmer listened in silence, and then he pulled himself slowly and with difficulty to his feet. He took the glass in one hand and the bottle in the other,

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and threw them both into the glowing grate. There was a great hiss and splutter and flare, as if some living, angry thing had been dashed into the heart of the fire, and the blue bottle slowly twisted itself into strange shapes in the fervent heat. Eyton watched with a species of fascination, a strange kind of triumph filling his heart. He had always known that his uncle was more brave and great and good than other men; and now he felt that he had proved it. He did not for a moment believe that Sir Aylmer had ever hesitated in his decision; he believed that he had only tried to test the resolution of his nephew.

"To him that overcometh—him that overcometh," said the voice in his head again and again.

"O Uncle Aylmer," he said, turning suddenly round, "how you must like that chapter about overcoming."

As usual there was no reply. Eyton was growing accustomed to have the conversation mostly to himself. Sir Aylmer only looked at him and made no attempt to speak.

"Shall I read it to you now?" asked the boy with sudden earnestness, and without waiting for a reply he fetched a big Bible from the shelf and sat down on the floor. "I used to read to mother when she was ill. She liked it better than anything else;" and in his clear, distinct tones he read the chapters that he felt certain were favourites with his uncle.

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Sir Aylmer lay back in his chair with closed eyes and listened as to the sound of a loved voice long unheard, till a kind of languor stole upon him that was half unconsciousness, half sleep, and which soothed him as the drug had never done which he had cast into the fire.

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XIII.

MAKING FRIENDS.

IT was with a sensation of keen pleasure that Eyton received upon the following Sunday afternoon a distinct invitation to his uncle's room.

"I am going to church, if you please, sir," said Bunyard, "and my master would be glad if you would go and sit with him whilst I am away."

"Oh, I should like that!" cried Eyton. "I am so glad he wants me! Is there anything for me to do? How is he to-day?"

"Much better. I am in hopes he is round the corner now; and that without that drug I spoke about to you that was doing such harm. You were quite right in what you said, sir. He never so much as named it again after he had once passed his word. Seems odd that you should have known him better than I."

Eyton's face glowed as he ran across the hall, but he did not say a word.

He had paid furtive visits to his uncle several times a day since that afternoon when the blue bottle had

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been thrown into the fire, but he had not been vouchsafed a word or even a look, and had not felt encouraged to remain long. Sir Aylmer had in fact been passing through a sharp crisis of illness, and it had been small wonder that he had not been able to notice his nephew; but Eyton was haunted by the fear that he had given offence, therefore this summons to the sick-room was the more welcome.

He stole quietly in, and then seeing that he was watched for, and that his uncle looked altogether different from what he had done latterly, he advanced with more confidence.

"I'm so glad you're better. Please don't be ill any more. We shall have such nice times together if only you can get about. You've never seen Red Rover yet, except that day in the wood. There are such lots of things I want to show you when you get well and can walk about."

Sir Aylmer was looking at the boy more attentively than he had ever done before. His mind was more free to observe, his thoughts were at leisure from himself, now that he was at ease once more.

"All in good time," he said quietly; "we shall have plenty of time to see everything in due course. Tell me, boy, have you not been very dull all alone here this last year? have you not been almost moped to death?"

"Oh no. I have had a good deal to do; and I don't think I am lonely often. I have so much to think

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about, you know: being alone and having no one to talk to makes one think a good bit, and it's very nice."

"What do you think about?" asked Sir Aylmer shortly.

Eyton sat down on a stool and clasped his hands round his knees.

"Well, I think about a lot of things—things I read, and things Mr. Creighton used to tell me about till he went away; and then, of course, I think a great deal about you."

"About me? Why?"

"Oh, I couldn't help it, you know, living in your house. People talk about you, and you seem like the heroes of the books I read. That's why I wanted to know you so much. I thought it would do me good."

Sir Aylmer did not answer, and presently the boy's thoughts roved off in another direction.

"I think I know now why you told them to take down mamma's picture and put it on the floor," he said. "I used to wonder about it, but I can quite understand now."

Sir Aylmer's face contracted sharply.

"What do you mean, child?"

"Why, you can see it so much better as you sit in your chair," explained Eyton, coming over and perching himself upon the arm. "She seems to be looking straight at us, and smiling as if she was pleased that we are together. I daresay she is pleased," he added dreamily after a short pause. "She would be pleased,

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you know, for there to be somebody to take care of me, and somebody to love you;" and for the first time in his life Eyton attempted a little caress, by laying his small soft hand gently on Sir Aylmer's.

"Eyton," said the baronet suddenly, "you asked me once about your father's last hours, and if he left any message for you. Do you wish to hear that message now?"

"Yes, uncle, please."

But before delivering it Sir Aylmer asked another question of the boy.

"How did you know I was there?"

"I knew because Bunyard said so; but we *almost* knew before—Mr. Creighton and I. You see it was just the kind of thing you *would* do, to go to your brother when he was in danger, and nobody else would dare to travel in the country. That is how I felt about it."

"Oh, indeed; you felt like that. Is that what Mr. Creighton felt too?"

"I should think so; it was he who first told me about it. It came into his head first. You see he had an advantage: he had seen you and I hadn't—at least only your picture."

Presently, receiving no answer, Eyton slipped down and took a footstool at the baronet's feet, leaning his dark head confidingly against his knee.

"Please will you tell me about papa? Did it hurt him much—to be killed?"

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"No; he suffered no pain, and his mind was quite clear. He lived one night and one day after the battle."

"And were you with him all that time?"

"Yes."

"I shouldn't have thought a civilian would have been allowed to be there."

Sir Aylmer smiled a grim smile.

"Gold, and determination, and a name that is known, can do most things, and carry most points, as you will find out for yourself one of these days, boy. I was there when your father was brought in. He was carried to my quarters direct."

"How pleased he must have been to see you!" said Eyton with shining eyes.

"I think so. We had not met for many years. We had a good deal to say."

"And you stayed with him all the time—Bunyard said so. And he sent a message to me—I am sure he did. Please tell me what it was."

"He said that he hoped you would always remember him—and—your mother, and all that they both had taught you. He hoped that you would be a brave soldier all your life, and die in harness at last, with your sword in your hand and your face to the foe, as a good soldier does. He thought you would remember what good things are in store for those who have overcome their enemies; but he wished you above all things to strive, not after the reward for its

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own sake, but for the approval of Him who gives the reward. He was sorrowful in the thought that he should see you no more in this world, but he died in the full assurance that you would join him and your mother beyond the grave when your turn came."

Eyton drank in every word with breathless earnestness; for a few moments he could not trust his voice, but when he had mastered the disposition to cry, he looked up with his liquid, pleading, dark eyes, and said,—

"O Uncle Aylmer, please help me to find the way. There is nobody now to help me but you."

"And what can I do for you, boy?"

"Can't you teach me as—as *they* used to? I do try to remember, but I am not very old yet, and I forget a great deal, and it is so hard when there is nobody to help one. Mr. Creighton was very kind; but he has gone away, and there is nobody left but you. Please, uncle, will you help me?"

"What can I do for you?"

"Would—would you let me read to you sometimes? I used to read to papa and mamma, and then they explained what I did not understand, and we talked about it, and it was *such* a help. I do read to myself, but it isn't at all the same; and Dick expects me to explain to him, and he can't often tell me things I don't know. But you would know everything. It would be *such* a help."

The dark eyes, so like the eyes in the picture oppo-

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site, were very wistful and pathetic. Sir Aylmer looked down at the earnest upturned face, and dropped his thin hand for a moment on the boy's head.

"You can do as you like about that, Eyton. I do not know how I can help you; but if I can, I will, for your parents' sake."

"How good you are!" cried the child gratefully. "I am so much obliged to you. May I get my Bible now—the one that was mother's? Sunday afternoon seems the right time for a read and a talk."

He ran quickly from the room, and returned with his book, settling himself once more at his uncle's feet.

"Shall we read in turns? or would you rather I read?"

"You can read—my eyes are soon tired. Read what you read the other day."

Eyton turned to the solemn chapters, so full of warning and of promise, and read them through from beginning to end. When he had done he closed the book, and sat gazing at his mother's picture.

"I always think of her when it comes to the part about 'walking in white,' because the words were put up over her grave. 'And they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.' O Uncle Aylmer, how can we make ourselves worthy—I mean how can I? I am only a little boy, and I do such a lot of naughty things. It does seem so hard to be good—like that."

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After a long silence Sir Aylmer said,—

"What do you think about it yourself?"

"I am trying to remember what papa said when I asked him. I *think* he said that nobody, not even any one like mamma, could be worthy to walk with Jesus in white till He had made them so. Is that right?"

"I suppose so, boy, if your father said it."

"And will He make me 'worthy' too, if I ask Him, do you think?"

"I should think so," answered the baronet, with a look and a sigh the boy did not understand. "Is it not of children it is said that 'of such is the kingdom of heaven'?"

"Yes; but I think that must mean quite little children, who have no real sins to keep them back. Only —only of course if we are sorry, really sorry for our sins, Jesus washes them away and makes us as white as snow. Oh, that is how it is—I remember now; I am so glad. There is a story about it somewhere, I think. We are like children in a garden, and we have white dresses given us; but everything we do wrong makes a stain, and only Jesus can take the stain away. But He can and He does if we are sorry, and go to Him and ask Him. And then I suppose when we die, if we are faithful, and have overcome, and have been washed quite white by Him, we can walk with Him in white. I think my father and mother are doing that now. Isn't it something like that?"

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"Very likely, very likely. You have been taught more recently than I. Perhaps you know best."

But that notion made Eyton smile. He found something strangely fascinating in his uncle's odd and unexpected sayings.

"Really good and holy men *never* think themselves the least bit good," he thought to himself. "Papa often said so. I should not be a bit surprised if Uncle Aylmer did not think himself in the least bit out of the way good. It would be just like him not to know."

Meantime Sir Aylmer had possessed himself of the boy's Bible, and had turned to the fly-leaf. Upon it were inscribed these words:—

"Madelaine Desborough. The gift of her husband;" and below, in a feeble hand,—

"For Eyton Desborough. The last gift of his mother.

"'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.'"

The baronet closed the book and leaned back in his chair, looking straight into the glowing embers. A strange shadow rested on his face. Yet several of its bitter and sneering lines were smoothed out as they had not been for years.

Eyton was so pleased at having established friendly relations with his hero that his heart was all in a glow. If he had but known it, a part of his happiness was

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due to the fact that this interview had recalled to mind a number of old and sweet associations. He believed that his uncle would now be to him something like what his parents had been in past days—a friend and companion as well as a model and instructor. All the vague loneliness seemed to have passed out of his life, and he was happy in the unquestioning way that belongs to childhood alone.

Presently he actually coaxed his uncle to tell him stories of his past—stories of the life in the old house when there had been two brothers living there, and open hospitality had been the order of the day. Eyton liked to fancy what the great rooms must have looked like when bright with lights and decked with flowers. He pictured the gay dresses of the ladies and the flash of silver and glass, and wondered whether he should ever see anything like it there himself.

When Bunyard came back, it was to find quite an animated conversation going on between his master and the child—at least Eyton was animated enough, talking away in an eager fashion, fast and freely; whilst Sir Aylmer listened and threw in a word here and there, the look on his face showing plainly that he was in no wise displeased.

After that day there was no fear left in Eyton's mind towards the uncle he had loved so long and thought about so much. A curious species of friendship seemed to be established between the two, and the boy's hero-worship displayed itself increasingly,

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and deepened in proportion as he saw more and more of its object.

The very next morning Red Rover was led round to the library window, to be seen and admired by the master, and a long and delightful discussion of his many excellent "points" was afterwards held between uncle and nephew. Then Eyton must needs hear all about the first Red Rover, and there was so much to tell about them both that the talk threatened to become interminable.

Now Eyton had another confidant than Dick to tell his adventures to, and he could talk to his uncle of many, many feelings and puzzling questions that the servant could never have entered into. It was a great advantage, too, to have some one to whom to refer when difficulties arose in his own studies or those of his pupil. Sir Aylmer's store of information seemed endless, and he began to direct Eyton's daily reading in a way that gave to that congenial occupation a zest and meaning it never possessed before.

As the baronet's eyesight was not strong, he used to profess a wish to hear the boy read his daily tasks aloud, and would let in upon the subject in hand such a wonderful flood of new light, and show it up in so many different aspects, that Eyton was quite carried away by excitement and delight.

They were an oddly assorted pair, perhaps, but the companionship was doing much for both. For the first time for many years—almost for the first time

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in his life—Sir Aylmer had undertaken a distasteful task from a sense of duty, and had deliberately set himself to a course of action from which he shrank with morbid dislike. To his great surprise he was finding a curious kind of pleasure in the very associations which he expected to be fraught with nothing but pain, and a new interest was slowly awakening within him more healthy than anything he had known for long, because more human and unselfish. He had come to his ancestral home fully expecting to detest both it and its new inmate, and instead of this the old love of the place was slowly asserting itself, whilst the presence of the boy acted as a soother of his feelings instead of a constant irritant. He had respected the lad and felt a certain pride in him from the day when he had advised him to keep his promise, and throw away the drug that he had been warned against. He had been touched by the boy's confidence in himself, and pleased by his steadfastness of purpose. It had given him an intuition that the child might actually be interesting, and the rest had followed naturally of itself.

But the seal to the dawning friendship was set a little later, when the child first brought his beloved violin to play to his uncle.

He had not, so far, said a word about his beloved instrument, and when he had played upon it in his far-off nurseries, not a sound had penetrated to the library below. Eyton had no idea that his uncle

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shared his own passion for music, and it was only by chance he discovered the fact.

One dark day early in December, when the twilight was fast drawing on, Eyton entered the library after his ride to find his uncle rather unwell and indisposed to talk; and after a short time the boy went off upstairs to solace himself with his beloved fiddle.

But as he played the sweet old airs he had learned long ago from his mother, it occurred to him that perhaps it would soothe and please Sir Aylmer to hear them too. His mother had always delighted in music when she was tired or ill, and what had pleased her might very possibly please another.

So with his violin under his arm he stole quietly downstairs, and slipped into the library without making the least sound. Placing himself then in the shadow of a great book-case, he began playing his favourite tunes with all the delicacy and finish of a born musician. There was a purity of tone about Eyton's touch that was undoubtedly an inherited gift, and he had the true ear and the suppleness of finger which are so essential to the violinist. His mother's careful teaching had not been thrown away, and his own natural gift had made him an apt pupil. He did not attempt great feats of execution; he contented himself with simple melodies well within his power, and the result was that his playing was singularly attractive—an effect doubtless enhanced by the penetrating sweetness of the instrument in his hands.

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He had no idea of the effect he was producing by his music. He played on and on, forgetful at last of his surroundings or of anything besides the sweet sounds he evoked. But when at length a plaintive air died away into silence, a voice from the far end of the room spoke, and there was a quiver in it suggestive of emotion.

"Boy, is that you?"

"Yes, uncle."

"Who taught you to play the violin?"

"My mother first. I have gone on by myself."

"What instrument is it you have?"

"That lovely one you got for her. I felt *sure* you would let me have it to play on, though I have always forgotten to ask. Do you mind, uncle?"

"No. Play some more; play the airs she taught you. It is like hearing her again."

This was the highest praise Eyton could desire. He played on unweariedly till Bunyard appeared with his master's dinner, and the arrival of lamps broke the spell.

But the next day when he came into the room, he found that a piano had been moved into it, and Sir Aylmer was seated at it, playing negligently, yet with that accuracy of touch that showed the master's hand.

"Fetch your violin," he said briefly; and when Eyton had done this and had tuned it to the piano, a piece of music was set before him, and for the first time in his life he experienced the keen pleasure and

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excitement of an *ensemble* performance with a true musician. His uncle was master as well as accompanist, and a strict master to boot; but the delight of that hour was never forgotten by Eyton, and this was only the first of many such lessons to follow.

Little by little the hearts of the lonely little boy and the world-worn man were knit together by an ever-strengthening tie. Each felt he needed the other; each was, consciously or unconsciously, learning new lessons every day that passed. Eyton was aware of the progress he made along the royal road to learning. Possibly Sir Aylmer was less conscious of the steps he made along the narrow path he had begun to tread; but a child's words had awakened long-slumbering thoughts and feelings, a child's influence was drawing him out of the darkness into the light, and Sir Aylmer Desborough was learning to thank God in his heart for sending him his little heir to be his guide and counsellor.

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XIV.

A NEW RELATION.

A MONTH passed tranquilly away. Christmas came and went with little outward show to mark it; but Eyton was so happy and content that he never thought of missing anything, or of complaining of the quietness of his life. He loved his uncle with an absorbing love that never changed or wavered, and which made the great happiness of his life, and each day seemed to bring the two nearer and nearer together.

Sir Aylmer's health had begun slowly and steadily to improve, and in his heart he secretly thanked the boy for this. He felt uncertain whether, but for him, he should ever have eschewed the use of the narcotic which gave him ease at the price of increasing debility, and the new interest he took in life from having another than himself to think for was without doubt an immense gain to him. Life was no longer to him a mere dreary waste, nor death a blank sleep and forgetting. Both had new meanings for him now, and increase of happiness had brought with it increase of health as a natural consequence.

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"We are such friends, you see," Eyton would sometimes say with an air of deep satisfaction, as the two sat over their fire together. "I used to fancy what it would be like to be friends with a real hero, but it's ever so much nicer than anything I ever fancied. Real things always are better than make-believe; aren't they, Uncle Aylmer?"

The baronet smiled and sighed as he often did when Eyton propounded one of his metaphysical questions; and the boy began to feel that for those who had lived longer life was not altogether the simple thing he found it.

Only one thing troubled him, and that was the fear that he might have to go to school some day soon and leave his uncle alone. Sir Aylmer spoke from time to time as though such a thing were inevitable, but Eyton could not see why at all.

"Why should I go?" he asked. "I should so dislike to leave you all alone. Aren't some boys brought up at home?"

"Yes; but ordinary homes are not like this, Eyton."

"No, of course not. I don't believe there is such a lovely old house anywhere in the world besides; and all boys can't have such great advantages as I have."

"Oh, you have special advantages, have you? And what are they, pray?"

"Why, you see, there are a great many. There is this library for one thing, with books about every-

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thing; and then I have you to teach me. It isn't every boy, I'm sure, who has a tutor who knows everything, and who understands all the languages in the world as well as English. I have great advantages, I know, and it seems a pity to lose them by going to school, though of course it must be troublesome to you to teach me."

Sir Aylmer smiled a little to himself at this exposition of Eyton's sentiments.

"That is not exactly my point of view," he remarked presently. "But possibly you would hardly understand mine. I daresay the life we lead here does not strike you as so very extraordinary."

"It is very pleasant," said Eyton; "I don't wish for anything different."

But Sir Aylmer, who knew more of the world than Eyton could be expected to do, knew also that it would not do for the boy to grow up in such utter isolation; and much as he disliked the idea of parting with him, he had made up his mind to do so when the autumn should come and Michaelmas term commence, when a new turn in the face of affairs was brought about by a circumstance altogether unexpected and not a little surprising.

One cold February afternoon, as the light was fading in the sky, and Eyton had closed his book and drawn up his chair for a comfortable talk with his uncle, the door was suddenly thrown open, and Bunyard announced in pompous fashion,—

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"Lady Elizabeth Desborough."

Eyton was so astonished that he just stared at the new-comer, eyes and mouth open wide, without so much as moving or rising. He had never heard of such a person in his life, and wondered if she were by chance an impostor, and what his uncle would say to her in that case. He thought that it would be altogether so romantic and amusing to hear the baronet unmask the hypocrite, that it was almost a disappointment to him when the ensuing dialogue convinced him that this Lady Elizabeth was no impostor, and also that she was well known to his uncle.

As she advanced from behind the screen, a tall, stately figure in black—it was too dark to discern features—Sir Aylmer rose from his chair.

"How do you do, nephew Aylmer?" The words were clearly enunciated in a voice as true and sweet as a silver bell, yet with something slightly incisive and aggressive in the intonation. "It is a strange thing indeed to find *you* of all people an inmate of Desborough Court!"

"And yet we parted here last not such an unheard-of time ago," answered Sir Aylmer, advancing and greeting his kinswoman with punctilious courtesy. "And may I inquire to what I am indebted for the pleasure of this very unexpected visit?"

"Certainly, nephew; that is what I myself propose to explain. Are you aware that it is only within

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the last few weeks that I have heard of your return to England?"

"Indeed! Well, as my movements are not habitually recorded by the public press, it is conceivable that the world at large may remain in ignorance of them."

"Your relations might not unreasonably expect to be informed of your movements."

"I gave up writing letters many years ago."

"Aylmer! Aylmer! you were incorrigible as a boy, and as a man you are worse. Words seem wasted on you." Yet there was a little suspicion of laughter in the voice that both listeners were quick to hear.

"Your errand?" questioned the baronet. "Are you staying anywhere in the neighbourhood? How have you come?"

"I am at the 'George.' I have come for one night only. My errand to you is easily explained."

Sir Aylmer rose and rang his bell.

"Bunyard, send the man who brought Lady Elizabeth back to the 'George' for her luggage, and desire Mrs. Mansfield to prepare a room immediately for her ladyship."

"My dear Aylmer, I desire you will do no such thing," exclaimed the lady hastily; but Bunyard had already withdrawn, and Sir Aylmer leaned back in his chair, saying languidly,—

"Pardon me, my dear aunt, but I never give an order twice over. It is against my principles."

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"Humph! did not know you had any."

"I have developed some of late. In bygone years, when you used to descant to me upon the error of my ways, you were clever enough to foresee that your words would come back to me in my latter years. You were quite right. They have done so. I owe you a vast debt of gratitude."

"One never knows whether you speak in earnest or in mockery, Aylmer; but possibly time may have wrought a change in you. Is it true what I hear—that poor Philip's only child is at present beneath your roof; that you and he are living here alone together?"

All this time the visitor had seen nothing of Eyton, who was curled up in deep shadow, listening and watching with the silent concentration natural to him. Now he would have moved and shown himself, but received a slight peremptory sign from his uncle to remain where he was.

"Philip's boy has been here some time. Philip sent him when he was ordered off to Egypt. Strange choice, was it not, to commit him to me? Yes, we are living under the same roof now. Do you wish to see the child?"

"All in good time. It is on his account I am here. Had I known before what was going on, I should have been here earlier. Aylmer, I have come to take the boy away. I cannot reconcile it with my conscience to allow him to stay. You must know as

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well as I do that you are not a fit person to have the sole care and responsibility of a child. You should not have undertaken the office."

"I did not do so; the office was thrust upon me."

"Then no doubt you will gladly be relieved of it."

"I shall be pleased to listen to what you have to propose."

"What I propose is simply to take the child away and bring him up myself. I am not a rich woman, as you may know, but still I can afford to give the boy such advantages as befit his position. My two daughters are still in the schoolroom, and he will join them there. He will receive the kind of tuition his father would have wished. I knew little of Philip since his childhood, but what I have heard has been enough to show me how widely his life and principles differed from yours."

"Yes; Philip was always something of a dreamer and sentimentalist; but strange as it may appear, it was to my guardianship he left the boy. Suppose I decline to give him up?"

"I do not believe you will decline. I do not think you are altogether lost to all sense of right. Aylmer, ask yourself the question honestly: are you a fit companion for a young child?"

"My acquaintance with young children is not sufficiently exhaustive to enable me to attempt a reply; but, waiving that matter for the present, my good aunt, will you not tell me a little about yourself

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since last we met? I am almost as ignorant of your affairs as you must be of mine. I heard of my uncle's death some ten years ago, but that is all I know. I suppose the two young cousins I teased and cuffed twenty and odd years ago are grown up and out in the world by this time?"

"Yes, they are in India and doing well. My two daughters, who are many years younger than the boys, are with me still. Margaret is seventeen, and Letty two years younger. We live in a small house on the outskirts of London, so that educational advantages are easily obtainable for the girls. My husband was rather unfortunate in his affairs during his lifetime, and we have to consider ways and means; but we are very comfortable in a quiet kind of way, and our home is a home in the best sense of the word. I am not afraid of inviting my little great-nephew to come to us. I feel certain we could make him happy."

"Which you feel certain I do not?"

"Well, Aylmer, I have no wish to say anything unpleasant; but the whole appearance of this house is so utterly desolate, that I quite shudder at the idea of a child's being cooped up here all alone. And as for calling yourself a companion for him, well, you know there is such a thing as finding the remedy worse than the disease!"

Eyton could stand this kind of thing no longer. He did not understand all that was said, still less all that was implied in this dialogue; but he had heard

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enough to rouse in him a great many new feelings, and a good deal of indignation and fear. Suddenly raising himself up from the chair in which he was ensconced, he got on to his feet, and walked boldly up to the intruder.

"I don't know who you are," he said, "and I don't wish to say anything rude, but I belong to my uncle Aylmer, and I love him better than any one in the world, and I don't want to leave him to go and live anywhere else."

The stranger turned suddenly round in her chair.

"What! is this Philip's boy?—Let me look at you, my dear. What a likeness, to be sure! What do you say?—you love your uncle, and do not wish to leave him? Did you hear me say that I wanted to carry you off?"

"Yes; I was here all the time."

"Indeed! you were very quiet."

"I often sit quiet a long time together. Uncle Aylmer is often very unwell; then if I am quiet he can do with me in the room. If I could not sit still, I should have to go away."

"And you like staying better?"

"Yes, of course I do; any one would—any one, at least, who had an uncle as good and kind as my uncle Aylmer."

Lady Elizabeth seemed for once to have no reply ready, so the boy concluded in his quaint, grave way, "I don't know if you know it, but Uncle Aylmer is one of the best and greatest men in the world."

At this moment Bunyard appeared with a tea-tray

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in honour of the titled guest, and Eyton was instructed to do the honours, which he managed very deftly. He liked Lady Elizabeth better as time went on and she talked to him and his uncle in more friendly fashion. She was very handsome too, he thought, and not nearly so old as he had fancied an aunt of his uncle's must be; indeed she did not look much older than Sir Aylmer himself, and they talked as if quite on an equality. Eyton could not imagine who she was, though when he came to think of it he did remember that his father had said something about other relations of his whom he had lost sight of during his soldier life. Perhaps this was one of them.

"Lady Elizabeth's room is ready for her," announced Bunyard by-and-by. Eyton realized that Mrs. Mansfield must have bestirred herself well to get things in train for this new visitor. Perhaps she was glad to see her come, or perhaps she was growing used to sudden surprises.

Directly the visitor had left the room, Eyton pounced upon his uncle, to know who she was and all about her. Sir Aylmer told him freely all he asked.

"She is the wife or rather the widow of my father's only brother. He was a good deal younger than my father, and she was many years younger than her husband, so that she is not really more than ten or twelve years my senior. I knew her before her marriage as well as after, and she was the one person in the world who always spoke the truth to me."

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"I don't understand."

"Don't you? Well, I do not know that there is any special mystery in it. My father and mother and the world in general combined to spoil me, and make me think myself a person of vast importance and consideration and talent. Lady Elizabeth had clearer judgment and an engaging frankness of disposition. She told me many home truths about myself which I have never forgotten. I owe a good deal to my worthy kinswoman."

"Did my father know her? I don't think he told me about her."

"Your father was much younger than I. He was a mere lad when Lady Elizabeth and her husband left England for Russia, where he had a diplomatic appointment. When they returned home, Philip was himself out in the world. They cannot have met since he was a boy, and it is not likely that they corresponded."

Eyton came close up to his uncle's chair and laid hand upon Sir Aylmer's.

"You won't let her take me away?"

"Are you sure you would not like it? Remember, Eyton, that this is a very dull life we lead here."

"I'm *never* dull with you," cried the boy vehemently. "O uncle, please let me stay—unless—unless—you find me in your way." The last words were spoken with a pathetic little break.

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Sir Aylmer took the boy's hand in his, but his eyes were fixed gravely on the glowing fire.

"That is not the point, really, Eyton. The point to be considered is what is best for you."

"Papa gave me to you."

"Yes, that is the great argument in favour of our wishes; but we must look the question fairly in the face."

"*Our* wishes!" echoed Eyton with a lighting up of his whole face. "O uncle, do you *wish* me to stay with you? Do you like to have me here?"

"Yes, Eyton, I do like it; but, as I have said, that is not the only point to be considered."

Eyton's lips closed firmly over each other. He looked very like his uncle at that moment. He was feeling in his heart that if Sir Aylmer really wanted him it would be a hard matter for any one to get him away. He became conscious, for the first time in his life, of a latent power of will characteristic, had he but known it, of all the race who bore the name of Desborough.

"Then I shall remain with you."

He had not meant to speak the words aloud, but they came out as it were by accident.

Sir Aylmer smiled, but made no response.

"Run away now, and send Bunyard. We must dine in a little more state to-night; and you, Eyton, can come in to dessert if you like to dress yourself in your best clothes. We must remember that we have

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a visitor who has seen Desborough Court in all its former bravery; we must not quite disgrace ourselves before her."

Eyton went slowly and thoughtfully away. He felt the shadow of impending change, and he was half sorry and half glad without understanding why. But he was very resolute on one point—he would never let any one take him from his uncle. His first duty was to him; of that there could be no manner of doubt.

He was excited at the idea of dessert downstairs, and dressed himself with scrupulous care in honour of the unwonted grandeur he was to share.

When he entered the dining-room on Bunyard's final exit, his relatives were in such deep discussion that they had hardly attention to give to him. He sat down beside Sir Aylmer, and tried to understand what the talk was all about.

"It is a most sudden and extraordinary idea to me, Aylmer," Lady Elizabeth was saying. "It is most difficult to believe you can really wish it."

"It seems so simple and satisfactory to me," returned the baronet, "that I only wonder it never occurred to me before. No household is complete without a lady at its head. I want to do my duty by this boy, and by my neighbours in general, but both my health and my habits stand greatly in my way. I shall never marry now, yet it would be hard for Desborough Court to see nothing better than the regimen I alone am able to set on foot. Now, if you will consent to

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make it your home, all is simplified at once. You are a Desborough by marriage, an earl's daughter by birth, and eminently fitted for the position I ask you to fill. Your daughters will not be likely to dislike the change from their present abode to this, and their presence will give to the boy the companionship of younger persons. For a time they can study under the same preceptors, and when he is old enough for public school, his going will not leave me quite alone, and it will be a real home for him to return to in his holidays."

"My dear Aylmer, when can you have had the time to elaborate such a complete scheme?"

"It comes very quickly when once the framework is formed. I have been seriously anxious of late—anxious to make a change in my establishment, and altogether ignorant how it could be accomplished. As I have before said, the most necessary ingredient—a lady's presence—seemed absolutely unattainable. Come, my dear aunt; you always were a slave and a martyr to duty, even when it came in a most unpleasing shape. Act once again up to your principles, and consent to become the mistress of Desborough Court."

"My dear Aylmer, surely you do not expect me to give you an answer offhand. A step like this requires so much consideration. Suppose you were to tire of the arrangement and of English life, and go off again roving to the ends of the earth at a moment's notice?"

"Ah, well, then you would remain on doing my duty whilst I was away; but you will find that I

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shall not be a wanderer any longer. For one thing, I have not the health for it; for another, I have a magnet here;" and he laid his hand on Eyton's shoulder. The boy looked up at him with a proud, fond smile.

"Uncle Aylmer, is Aunt Elizabeth coming to live with us?"

"I hope so, Eyton. Run and ask her if she will. Tell her how much we both wish it, and how much you will like to see the old house looking as it used to do in old days."

Eyton ran round to second his uncle's petition, and was received with a warm embrace.

"We shall see, my little man, we shall see," she said in answer to his eager questions. "Old people like me do not make up their minds all in a minute, as you young ones do. But are you sure you would like the change? I did not think you liked me so very much a little while ago."

Eyton's frank, thoughtful gaze was bent upon her with earnest scrutiny.

"Well, since you ask me, I *didn't* like you so very much just at first, but I do now."

"And what has made you change your mind, young man?"

"I don't think it is I that changed. It seems to me that it was you."

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, at first I didn't think you properly appreciated Uncle Aylmer, and it didn't feel pleasant that

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he should not be appreciated, and I was rather vexed. But I think perhaps I did not understand, and that you like him better really than you appeared to do."

Lady Elizabeth laughed and kissed Eyton on the brow once again.

"Now, run off to bed, little one," she said, "for I have a great deal of business to talk with your uncle." And when the boy had gone, she turned a graver face towards her nephew, and said,—

"At least you have won *her child's* heart, Aylmer."

A strange look crossed the baronet's face.

"I owe him more than I can say."

It seemed so strange a speech to come from the lips of that cold, reserved man, that Lady Elizabeth looked at him in surprise.

"I had lost faith in everything," spoke Sir Aylmer slowly, "in God as well as man, and all was dark about me. That child's simple faith brought me back to the light again."

"His faith in you seems boundless."

"That was just it. He believed in me so utterly and entirely—what made him I cannot guess, but he did—that I could not utterly disillusion him. It is a strange thing what love and trust can do. Once I should have despised such a sentiment as purest folly, but it is the simple and literal truth."

"Of course it is, Aylmer. Love and faith come straight to us from God. They are the cords by which He draws us to himself."

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XV.

OLD DAYS COME AGAIN.

"WELL, I never! It will be like old times come again." Such was Mrs. Mansfield's exclamation a week or two later, when Eyton, swelling with importance, went down to her pantry full of the exciting news he had just heard. "I said to Jane, when her ladyship came to the Court the other week, that perhaps something would be done different like. But when she went away and nothing happened, I began to give it up. And so she's really coming to live here, is she? And the young ladies too! And we're to have a houseful of servants, and all the rooms opened and furbished up as they used to be? Well, I never did! I never thought to live to see the day, that I didn't."

"And you're to wear a black silk gown, and keep the keys, and do no work, but only look after all the indoor servants and the linen and the stores," cried Eyton, capering about in great excitement. "And Jane is to be upper housemaid, and wear a cap with pink bows in it and frills round her apron in the

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afternoon. And Dick—oh, but I must go and tell Dick himself, and Red Rover too! Oh, won't they both like it!" and off darted the boy to the stable-yard, ready to burst with delighted self-importance.

"Dick, Dick! where are you? Oh, I've got *such* news for you! Dick, how would you like to be coachman, with six horses and two grooms to look after? Do you know, Dick, Lady Elizabeth Desborough and her two daughters are coming here next month, to live here always."

"You don't say so, sir?"

"Yes, but I do. It's all true. We've been arranging it ever since she was here that day, but it's only been quite fixed to-day. And Dick, you are to send the brougham, and the landau, and the Stanhope phaeton into the town, to be done up fit for use if they want them; and you're to buy a pair of big carriage horses to draw them when Lady Elizabeth drives out. And you're to get two nice lady's saddle-horses for my cousins to ride, and one for a groom; and there will be Red Rover for me, and old Dobbin will stop on and do station work—fetching luggage, and so on—in the cart. Oh! that will make seven horses—*won't* that be a lot? And you're to be coachman, Dick."

Dick took all this information in bit by bit; but his own promotion astonished him the most.

"Coachman did you say, sir? Don't you mean groom? Isn't the master going to get some older man to put over the stables?"

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"No he isn't. He said that you had done your duty by the place for fifteen years, and that you deserved promotion. You're to have twenty-five shillings a week, and your livery and stable suits; and you can please yourself whether you live indoors or over the stables. And you're to try and find two grooms to be under you, as well as all the horses, though Uncle Aylmer will really do the engaging and buying. Fancy, Dick, five new horses! Oh, I'm so excited, I hardly know what to do!

But Eyton's excitement was good for him. It roused him out of his dreamy, absent ways, and made a child of him again. It even communicated itself to his uncle in a modified form; and that same afternoon, when the bright February sunshine was pouring in through the south windows of the house, uncle and nephew made a pilgrimage through the great state-rooms that had been shut up so long, and which Sir Aylmer had not visited for ten long years.

With his hand resting on the boy's shoulder, the baronet wandered through his fine old house, and memories that had long been sleeping woke within him at every step, till the eager talk of the child beside him passed unheard and unheeded, and he moved on in a world of his own.

Eyton knew the old home by heart, and every nook and cranny was dear to him. He was looking forward with keen pleasure to showing it all to his cousins, wondering if they would share his enthusiasm and his

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dreams, enter into his romantic imaginings, and play lady and queen to his prince and knight.

In the picture gallery they paused, and sat down side by side in one of the great oriel windows. Sir Aylmer was fatigued by the distance he had traversed, and Eyton was always content to sit beside him and talk or be silent as best suited the mood of his companion. After a long spell of silence he began to speak.

"Uncle, are you not very proud of your beautiful old house? Do you not love it with all your heart?"

"I am beginning to do so again, Eyton. There was a time when I almost hated it; and I can never feel the same pride and pleasure in it that a man ought to feel in his inheritance."

The tone was so grave that Eyton looked up in perplexity.

"Why not, uncle?"

"Because, Eyton, I have failed in my duty towards it and towards my dependants here. I had a great trust put into my hands, and did not fulfil the duties and responsibilities that came to me with it. I let my own selfish wishes master me, and as a natural consequence Desborough Court can never be to me what it was to my fathers before me."

"I don't understand."

"You will understand better as you grow older. A fine old property like this is not to be lightly held, nor is it the exclusive right of the present pos-

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sessor. It is his duty to improve the land and the condition of the people on it, so as to hand it down to his successor in as good a state, or better, than he received it from his father. This my forefathers did as a duty, but it is a duty I have neglected. I can make some amends yet, I trust; and you, Eyton, must endeavour to do the rest."

The boy looked up, a very earnest expression in his eyes.

"I don't quite understand you, uncle," he said. "What could I do?"

Sir Aylmer's hand rested on his nephew's shoulder.

"Have you ever realized, Eyton, that one day, in all probability, this place will belong to you?"

A troubled shadow crossed the boy's face. He was gazing out of the window as he made reply—

"I have heard people call me your heir, but I don't quite like it. I want us to be always here together."

"Well, my boy, I am not an old man yet, and I may be spared to see you grow up; we may have many years still to spend together; but in all human probability there will come a day when you will be Sir Eyton Desborough, the owner of all that you see about you, and it is perhaps good for us both sometimes to think of that time, and face the inevitable changes of life."

Eyton did not speak; he was still looking out over the sunny park.

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"I should like to think, my boy, that you would be a better master than I have ever been."

"How could I?" questioned Eyton, with something of indignant protest in his tone. "I can't bear you to talk like that. I shall never be half such a great and good man as you are."

A sad smile flitted across the baronet's face.

"Thank you, my boy, for your confidence in me. I wish it were better deserved; but leaving comparisons for a time, let me hear what you would do if you were master here. Suppose, when you come of age, that I hand the management of the property over to you—if my health still troubled me it is quite possible I might be glad to do this—what would you do with money and power if you had it?"

Eyton sat down beside his uncle, looking very much absorbed, and after thinking a good while he began to speak.

"I think, first of all, I should rebuild all the almshouses on Standen's Plot, and add some more to make a nice square all round. Dick told me that once the poor old men and women of the place, who couldn't work any more, and had no way of living except the workhouse, used to be put in the almshouses, and pay no rent, and have a little money to help them, and live happy and comfortable all their lives; but that a great many years ago now some horrid, wicked, dishonest man got hold of some papers, or money, or something—Dick didn't quite understand it all—that

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had been left for the poor, and ran away to another country with it, and so there was nothing left for the poor people, and the cottages fell into decay, and now they are no good for anything. Mr. Creighton tried to get money to put things right, but he could not get people to help him, and so all the old people who haven't got children to help them have to go to the workhouse. What I should like to do first would be to build up the almshouses, and fill them with nice old poor people, who have been good and industrious all their lives, and deserve a nice home when they are old."

Sir Aylmer listened in silence to this scheme. He well remembered the talk about the Standen's Plot scandal, and the little interest he had taken in it in his young days. He recalled the half-grudging way he had once promised twenty pounds to the fund for replacing the trust money if the needful amount should be obtained, and his perfect indifference when he learned that the attempt had failed.

How different had his feelings been from those of the child at his side! What had made the difference? he wondered. Who had taught this boy to care for the welfare of those about him? He put the question presently. Eyton looked almost surprised.

"Why, one can't help caring, you know, uncle. It is so very sad when people are unhappy, and it must be very melancholy to be very old and very poor as well. One feels it might have happened to oneself if

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things had been different. And what's the good of being rich, if one doesn't help other people?"

"Why, you could enjoy yourself with your money, buy everything you wanted, and be a great man, and have a fine happy life of it."

Eyton's face was very grave.

"I shouldn't call that being *great* at all; and I don't think any one would be happy long. It might be amusing and interesting for a little while, but when Sundays came, or you went to church, or read your Bible at home, or thought about what things would be like if one had to die—you know one *does* think like that sometimes when one hears of other people dying, particularly if one loves them—then I don't think one would feel at all happy. I should be afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of not seeing my father and mother again—and you, Uncle Aylmer. You know that parable about the people who fed the hungry, and clothed and visited and helped unhappy people; and the others who didn't? Well, papa and mamma were like the first—they were always doing kind things for people who were poor, or lonely, or sad; and if I went and joined with the others, I should not go to the same place as they have gone to; for you know He will say to them, 'Depart ye,' and to the good ones, 'Come.' And then, uncle, if one thinks of it, it is so nice to be kind to poor people, because you know what He said about it: 'Inasmuch as ye did it to them,

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ye did it to me.' If one only thinks of it, it's doing it to Him. That makes everything so nice."

Sir Aylmer was silent, revolving many memories in his mind. Eyton had risen, and was looking once more at the long row of family portraits.

"I wonder if they were all great men! Some of them have such nice, kind, strong faces. They look like men who have 'overcome.' I want to be like that; and there are a great many things to overcome as one grows older—I see that more and more. Only, I have great advantages, living with you. You will teach me to be brave."

"Why so, Eyton?"

"Oh, because you are so brave yourself," answered the boy, his eyes still on the pictures. "You went to be with my father, and stayed with him at the risk of your life. Bunyard said so; and I have seen with my own eyes how brave you can be. But I always knew it all along. You are a Desborough, you know."

"Yes, boy, and you also. Let us both try to be worthy of our name, and of the good men who went before us and built up the glory of our house. We have had heroes and martyrs amongst our ancestors—good and God-fearing men, who gave their lives for the truth, and never flinched from their duty, however hard it was. Doubtless they have long since reaped the reward of faithful service, and we will make it our aim to be worthy of the inheritance they have

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left behind for us, and to join them at last in the promised land, where those who 'overcome' are received."

It did not surprise Eyton as it would have surprised some people to hear Sir Aylmer speaking in such a strain. To him it appeared perfectly natural, and he looked up with eager, admiring eyes, that bespoke a world of love and trust.

"We understand one another so well, uncle," he said, as they proceeded to retrace their steps through the long corridors. "It is so nice that you think just the same about things as my father and mother tried to make me think. You teach me just in the way they would have liked me to learn. That is why father gave you to me, I suppose."

Every day just now was full of pleasure and excitement for Eyton. It was so interesting to watch the changes that almost every hour of the day brought with it. He was almost bewildered by the rapidity with which things happened. It was almost like living in a fairy tale.

For besides the opening out and renovating of the beautiful old house, the unearthing of treasures of silver, china, and glass, and the hanging of lovely old fabrics over doors and windows, the outside of the Court was subjected to changes even more astonishing.

It had never occurred to Eyton that what had once been a very fine old garden was now nothing better than a tangled wilderness, that many people would

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call a disgrace to the house; but he was soon to have his eyes opened.

One Monday morning a perfect gang of men and boys appeared on the place, and such a turmoil began under Sir Aylmer's superintendence as fairly bewildered the boy, who could have watched all day, so fascinated was he by the spectacle.

Paths were weeded and freshly gravelled; lawns cut and edges trimmed; tangled undergrowth was removed, so that the specimen trees and shrubs could stand out in their graceful beauty as in old days; and the moss-grown marble cleaned and restored. The quaint yew hedges and trees were clipped once more into the shapes of beasts and birds; and then market-gardeners came with carts full of bulbs in pots, and the bare beds were filled full of spring flowers—some, like crocuses, already in full bloom, whilst hyacinths and narcissi showed their buds and only waited for some hot spring sunshine to burst out into their fragrant glory.

"Oh, what a lovely garden we have now!" Eyton was never tired of exclaiming. "Uncle Aylmer, you are clever! I can't think how you knew how to make it so beautiful."

"You see, I remember it as it was before it all went to ruin. Those who mar ought to mend. It was certainly my place to restore it."

The choosing of the horses was another object of absorbing interest; and finding suitable names for

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them all was quite a study, and fairly taxed the patience of the whole household before the little master was satisfied. Eyton had so much riding that he grew quite an accomplished horseman, and the grave preoccupied look vanished from his face, only returning at rare intervals.

But perhaps the most wonderful surprise of all was something that happened just before the new inmates arrived at the Court.

Sir Aylmer had begun to go out more since the days had begun to lengthen out. Whenever the wind was not in the east, he would walk about the grounds with Eyton; and on really warm days such as we occasionally get even in the early spring, he would drive out in the Stanhope phaeton, with Eyton perched up beside him, highly delighted at the masterly way in which his uncle drove.

This pleasure was quite a novelty of course, as the carriage-horses had only been recently purchased, and Eyton enjoyed it immensely, more especially when he was intrusted with the reins and instructed in the art of driving. He found a pair of horses rather a handful, but he had plenty of courage and resolution, and his uncle was close beside him to help him out of any difficulty, and as the roads were very quiet, he had plenty of space at command. He liked these drives almost better than anything else, and one of them was the occasion for a very great surprise.

"Why, uncle," he cried one day as they were

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approaching a piece of ground a little way from the village, standing by itself, with a road all round it—"why, uncle, they are pulling down the old cottages on Standen's Plot!"

"So I see," replied Sir Aylmer quietly. "I suppose somebody has bought the plot. The parish authorities had power to sell under certain conditions."

"Oh, I wonder who has bought it, and what is going to be done! *May* I jump out and run and ask? I think that man in a black coat would know. He seems like a kind of foreman. May I ask him, uncle?"

"If you wish."

Eyton was out of the carriage almost before the words were spoken. He bounded off to the spot where the work was going on, and was absent a long time, discussing something so earnestly that it seemed as if he would never come back at all; but at last he did so, though not quite so fast as he had gone. His face wore a look of gravity, almost of oppression. He climbed to his seat in silence, and only when the horses had carried them out of sight of the place did he relieve his feelings by the exclamation,—

"O uncle!"

"Well, what did you find out, eh?"

"I found out," replied Eyton, "what I always knew—that you are the best and kindest man in all the world."

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Sir Aylmer looked straight at the horses he was driving.

"It is your doing, Eyton, not mine."

"You pretend it is me. The man told me it had been bought in the name of Mr. Eyton Desborough, and that the name was to be changed to Eyton's Plot. And oh, uncle! I don't know what to say—new almshouses prettier than the last! It seems too much. It does indeed."

"My dear boy," said the baronet gravely, "it ought to have been done long ago; and it was my place, as the richest landowner, to have seen to it. I have left my duty undone all these years. I need no praise for this tardy awakening."

"But why do you call it mine, when it is all yours really? I should like it to be called after you, uncle."

"No, Eyton: let it bear your mother's name; it is in memory of her and of your father that these buildings will be erected. I have long been turning over in my mind some suitable memorial to be raised to them. Hitherto I have been dissatisfied with every suggestion that has occurred to me, but this, I think, will do. It is fitting that their names should be blessed by the poor and needy, who never appealed to them in vain. Let it stand as a memorial to them —and as a thank-offering too."

The last words were a mere whisper, but Eyton heard them and wondered.

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"A thank-offering for what?" he asked.

Sir Aylmer glanced at him keenly.

"Do you think I have nothing to thank your parents for, boy?"

"I don't know. I daresay you have. O uncle, I wonder if they can see it all up in heaven! Oh, how happy they will be!"

"And, Eyton, it is to you that the management of this trust will mainly be committed. I understand little of such matters myself, but in your aunt Elizabeth you will find a worthy coadjutor. You must ask her advice as to all the rules and regulations necessary for the maintenance of such a charity as we found to your parents' memory. You will have to take great care that it is used without being abused by the people whom it is to benefit, and that it becomes a blessing to many. I will help you all I can, and procure the best possible advice; but as you grow in life I wish you to take the main responsibility of the undertaking, which is, in fact, of your own making. Let the Eyton almshouses be worthy of the name they will bear."

Eyton's face was very grave, yet his heart was full to overflowing with gladness and gratitude as the horses carried them home. He scarcely spoke a word to his uncle all that time; but he had hardly dismounted from his high perch before he had rushed off to Mrs. Mansfield, and had poured out to her all the wonderful news.

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"Well, I never did!" exclaimed that good woman in unfeigned surprise. "It is like old days come again, that it is. God bless you, Master Eyton, my dear, for you've brought a blessing to the old house, and no mistake!"

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XVI.

THE LAST.

IT was with feelings of the greatest excitement and pleasurable anticipation that Eyton stood at his uncle's side in the hall to welcome the new inmates to the old family home.

"Are you pleased they are coming, Uncle Aylmer?" he had asked a hundred times that day, and the answer had always been a satisfactory one.

Eyton himself was very glad, now that he had once got used to the idea. Mrs. Mansfield had assured him that "company" would be good for the master, and the boy began to feel that young companions would be pleasant for himself.

And now the sound of horse-hoofs and the roll of wheels down the avenue announced the return of the carriage. Up it dashed to the door, Dick sitting proudly on the box in all the bravery of the green and gold Desborough livery, managing his horses with great skill and dexterity, and the next minute Lady Elizabeth and her two daughters were entering the great door.

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Eyton's eyes were fastened at once upon the two girls. The elder one looked almost a grown-up young lady, she was so tall and so stately, and very like her mother. Still she had a very pleasant face, and her eyes smiled at Eyton, when she met his intent gaze, in a way that made him certain he should like her. As for Letty, the younger girl, she was small and slight, and wore short frocks, and did not look a bit more than thirteen, though she was, as Eyton knew, quite two years more.

He thought she was very shy, for she kept close to her mother's side, and never looked round at all, and seemed to tremble all over when Sir Aylmer spoke to her; but all the same there was something in the shape of the round rosy face and dimpled mouth that encouraged Eyton to believe she could easily be provoked to laughter, and when once he caught a glimpse of the bright, roguish, gray eyes, he was quite convinced of this.

As Sir Aylmer was ushering his guests into the drawing-room the boy slipped up to Letty.

"Would you like to come with me and see my rooms? I will show you all over the house, if you like, and we can have tea in my nurseries. I have a nice big sit-down tea, because I'm too little to dine downstairs. Would you like to come?"

Letty needed no second invitation. She slipped away from the others, and the moment the door had closed behind their retreating figures, she began

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waltzing round the hall like the veriest madcap.

"Are you Eyton? What an angel-child you were to rescue me so promptly from the grown-ups! Oh, what a lovely old house! I feel like jumping out of my skin at the idea of living here. I've always pined to live in the country—real country, you know, where one can have animals all round one, and a garden, and woods, and fields, and can run out without hats and gloves.—Oh, you darling! you beauty! Oh, *please* let me kiss you. I never saw such a magnificent creature in my life."

This last eulogium was addressed to King, who slowly reared himself up from his dusky corner to investigate this volatile stranger. He seemed to recognize the Desborough blood in the new-comer, and submitted to be hugged and kissed, though he let the demonstrations of delight be all on the side of the lady.

"If you like animals so much," said Eyton, "perhaps you would like to come and see your horse."

Letty turned on him with wide-open eyes.

"My horse! What do you mean?"

"I mean your horse—the one Uncle Aylmer has bought for you. She's black, and I've called her Gipsy—she's such a dear little thing, so affectionate, and only two inches bigger than Red Rover. Red Rover is my pony, you know; I've had him a long time now. Your sister's horse is Cid. He's bay, and

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bigger than yours. Your mother is to have the two carriage horses. They are Castor and Pollux; but I generally call them 'the great twin brethren,' after the ode of Macaulay's, 'The Battle of Lake Regillus,' you know. Why, what is it?" for Letty had sprung high into the air, and was executing a dance even wilder than before.

"A horse! a horse of my own! Oh, I don't believe it! I believe it's all a dream, one of those lovely, horrid dreams where one thinks one has everything one wishes, and wakes up to find it all gone! Pinch me, thump me, Eyton! I can't believe it's anything but a dream."

"Come and see then," cried Eyton, seizing her by the hand, and racing off to the stable-yard. He forgot that perhaps the yard was hardly the place to take a girl-cousin to the first moment of her arrival, but both were so excited that the proprieties were quite forgotten; and Letty's raptures over the sleek, gentle horses in their loose-boxes was a pretty sight to witness. It was hard to get her away from the stables, but when once in the wilderness behind the house, she was in a perfect transport of new delight at the sweetness and beauty of all she saw.

Eyton caught the infection of her enthusiasm, and they raced along the shrubbery paths and down the long avenues of fir and larch tree, till, breathless and panting, they were pulled up by the boundary fence, and Eyton declared that they must go in to tea.

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"I feel as if I'd known you all my life," he remarked to his companion as they mounted the stairs together. "I'm so glad you like animals and out-of-door things. We shall be so happy together."

"You're a darling yourself," cried Letty, who certainly seemed to have no shyness left in her. "I always have longed and pined for a brother—not a grown-up brother, I've got them, and they are no good, they're always away, but a brother of my very own, to play with and work with, and have for my companion. Let us be brother and sister—do, Eyton. I'll be such a nice sister to you if you'll only have me."

Eyton was enchanted with the idea. He had never dreamed of sisters' love and companionship, and now here was a charming and delightful sister claiming for adoption. The compact was sealed by a warm kiss on both sides, and the young people sat down to their first meal together, Letty taking her place behind the urn, and Eyton waiting upon her hand and foot.

"How pretty you are!" he said, looking admiringly into the round flushed face, with its sparkling eyes and wealth of tumbled yellow hair. "You look as if you were always laughing. I think you are just the person we want here."

For Eyton, being by nature and training quiet and grave and reserved, admired the contrast of Letty's bright, sunny temperament, and fell under the spell at once. He was not a bit awed by her superiority in

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years, for she was a veritable child at heart, and with her hair all falling over her shoulders, and the shyness gone as if by magic, she looked even younger than before.

What a merry meal that was! Mrs. Mansfield came up in the midst of it to make sure that the children were comfortable together, and Letty quite won her heart by her merry talk and eager interest in the old house, and by her admiration of all that had been done in honour of their reception.

"I can't make it out a bit," she cried. "I always thought Sir Aylmer was a perfect ogre, whom no one would go near. And now he turns out to be the most charming old gentleman in the world, who gives every one everything they wish for."

Eyton went off into a fit of laughter.

"What did make you get hold of such a notion, Letty? Why, Uncle Aylmer is the best and kindest man in the world."

"I believe he is now, but I was horribly afraid of him when I came. I was so afraid that I was almost sorry we were coming to live with him, though it's so delightful in other ways."

"Well, you mustn't be afraid of him any more," said Eyton encouragingly; "and if we go down to dessert, or into the drawing-room after dinner, you can tell him how much you like Gipsy. He was so particular in buying her that she should be strong and quiet and good-tempered, just fit for a lady. He

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made more fuss over your saddle horses than over any of the others."

Letty was much impressed, and promised to try and screw up her courage to the sticking-point and thank the baronet when she saw him.

"But I'm much too big to go in to dessert like a little girl, so don't you go either, Eyton. Let us stay up here, and then go down to the drawing-room and wait for them there. Margaret is to dine now, because she is nearly eighteen, and too grown-up to belong to the nurseries. I'm so glad I'm not grown-up yet. I think it must be *so* dull."

Eyton had not thought of this before; he wondered if it would seem dull when he grew too old to play games and imagine himself somebody else. He began to tell Letty of all the things he played at by himself in the old house, and found that she was a romancer herself, and delighted to find a kindred spirit. What games they would play together, now that there were two of them! Such a glorious vista of possibilities opened out before them, that again Letty feared it was all a dream, and that it was too good to be true.

Later on they both dressed themselves with care and went down to the drawing-rooms to wait until dinner should be over. Letty looked very pretty in her white Indian silk and gold-coloured ribbons, and she was again a little subdued by all the grandeur about her. Eyton went round the room with her,

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showing off all its treasures, and telling of the renovations that had been accomplished in their honour. The stories he managed to introduce in praise and glory of his uncle were innumerable, and at last Letty remarked in her mischievous way that she should be soon frightened again because he was such a paragon of virtue.

"But you won't when you get to know him," was the reassuring answer. "I know what you mean, because just for a little time I was rather afraid myself, but all that went off directly I came to know him really. There is no one so good and kind as Uncle Aylmer."

"And I don't even know what to call him," pursued Letty. "We are cousins really, and cousins call each other by their names; but of course we can't do that. Why, he looks as old as mother, and is only about ten years younger. Margaret thinks we shall call him 'Cousin Aylmer,' but I think *that* sounds much too familiar. I should like to say 'Sire' as they did in old books, or even 'Sir Aylmer,' only I suppose that would sound as if I did not like him and wanted to be stand-offish."

"Call him Uncle Aylmer, as I do. I'm sure he'll like it!" cried Eyton eagerly. "You know you ought to, if we are brother and sister; and I can't change. If I were you I'd begin to call him uncle straight away."

"Won't he mind?"

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"Oh no; I think he'll like it."

So Letty took her courage in both hands, and as soon as Sir Aylmer was fairly established in his chair beside the fire, she came boldly up and halted just in front of him.

"Please, Uncle Aylmer, I want to thank you very, very much for that dear darling black horse you have got for me to ride, and to tell you that I think you are the very nicest man in all the world."

This last part of the sentence had not been premeditated, but it slipped out unawares when she met the glance of the gray-blue eyes fastened upon her in kindly scrutiny.

Eyton was standing by with beaming face.

"O uncle, it is so nice to have Letty! We're going to be brother and sister always, and play and do lessons, and ride and read together. She's just as fond of animals and all that kind of thing as I am, and we like the same kind of books and the same kind of games. Oh, we are going to be so happy!"

"And forget the old uncle altogether, eh?"

"Oh no, no!" cried they both in a breath. "Why, how could we forget you? you're the person who does everything;" and Eyton added, "But you will have Aunt Elizabeth to talk to you now, when we are out or busy. But we shall come often to see you and tell you every single thing we do—shan't we, Letty?—because, you know, we couldn't do anything if it weren't for you!"

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"Well, run away now, chatterer, and talk to your aunt, and let me make acquaintance with my new niece. Margaret, I can see, is aching to go and look over all that music, and presently Eyton shall bring his fiddle and give us a concert. He ought to be in bed, by-the-by; but as he is much too excited to sleep, he may just as well stop up for once and help to do the honours of the house."

So Margaret crossed the great room to the piano and music-stand, and Eyton went over to Lady Elizabeth, and began pouring into her ears the story of the almshouses, and how she was to be the counsellor and adviser of those concerned, and help to establish the affair on a good and firm basis.

Meantime Letty seated herself on a low seat in front of the fire, and with the rosy light playing picturesquely over her face and dress and shining hair, she began to answer Sir Aylmer's questions, shyly at first, but with more and more confidence as time went on, till at length shyness was quite a thing of the past.

She told of her life in London, her studies with the French mademoiselle who was to follow them to the Court after Easter, and the funny old music-master who looked so dried-up and queer, and yet played so exquisitely that he sometimes almost made her cry. She told how well she and Eyton would be able to study together, because they were just about as far advanced in Latin and Greek and algebra; and

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though she knew more about English grammar and composition and literature, he was more advanced in history and geography, so that they could mutually help one another.

"I like boys' lessons best, but I haven't been learning them very long. I only began Greek a year ago; but as Eyton doesn't know much himself, that is rather an advantage now. We can go on together, and Eyton can understand French and speak it quite nicely for a boy, because he has lived in places where lots of the people talk it; so mademoiselle will like him, and he won't puzzle her. It will be so nice to have a brother to do lessons with. Margaret has always been so much ahead of me since I had scarlet fever and things after it, and didn't work for a year, and got so backward. I'm rather glad I'm backward now; it makes me nearly the same as Eyton in so many things."

And then the conference was interrupted by the sweet sound of Eyton's violin as he began to play an air to Margaret's accompaniment, and Letty got up and went over to the group by the piano, whilst Lady Elizabeth came and took a vacant chair beside Sir Aylmer.

Music seemed to run in the Desborough family, and soon the sweet clear voices of the sisters were sounding through the room in one of Mendelssohn's exquisite duets.

Sir Aylmer leaned back in his chair, looking across

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at the dark-eyed boy and fair graceful girls with a strangely softened look upon his face.

"It is like old times come back again," said Lady Elizabeth softly. "I little thought to see the old house again like this. My dear nephew, I trust that this may once more become a happy home to you."

He turned his face towards her. There was a smile upon it such as she had never expected to see there again.

"It is the boy's doing," he said simply.

"The boy has been a blessing to you indeed, Aylmer," was the thoughtful answer; "and yet it takes more than a child's hand to work such a change."

He gave her one quick glance.

"It is not the first time that a child's hand has led the traveller from darkness to light."

Silence then, for neither of these two could talk much where their deeper feelings were concerned. The silence was broken by Margaret's full clear voice:

"'I know that my Redeemer liveth.'"

Lady Elizabeth turned suddenly to her nephew; her eyes were full of tears.

"Aylmer, can you say that too?"

"I can."

And they spoke no more words till the song had died away.

Then the young people came forward in a body to say good-night.

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The warmth of the embrace bestowed upon him by Lady Elizabeth rather surprised Eyton, but he returned it affectionately, wondering what made his face feel damp as he pressed it to hers.

"God bless you, my child," she said tenderly; "may He keep you always safe, and give you grace to go on as you have begun."

THE END.

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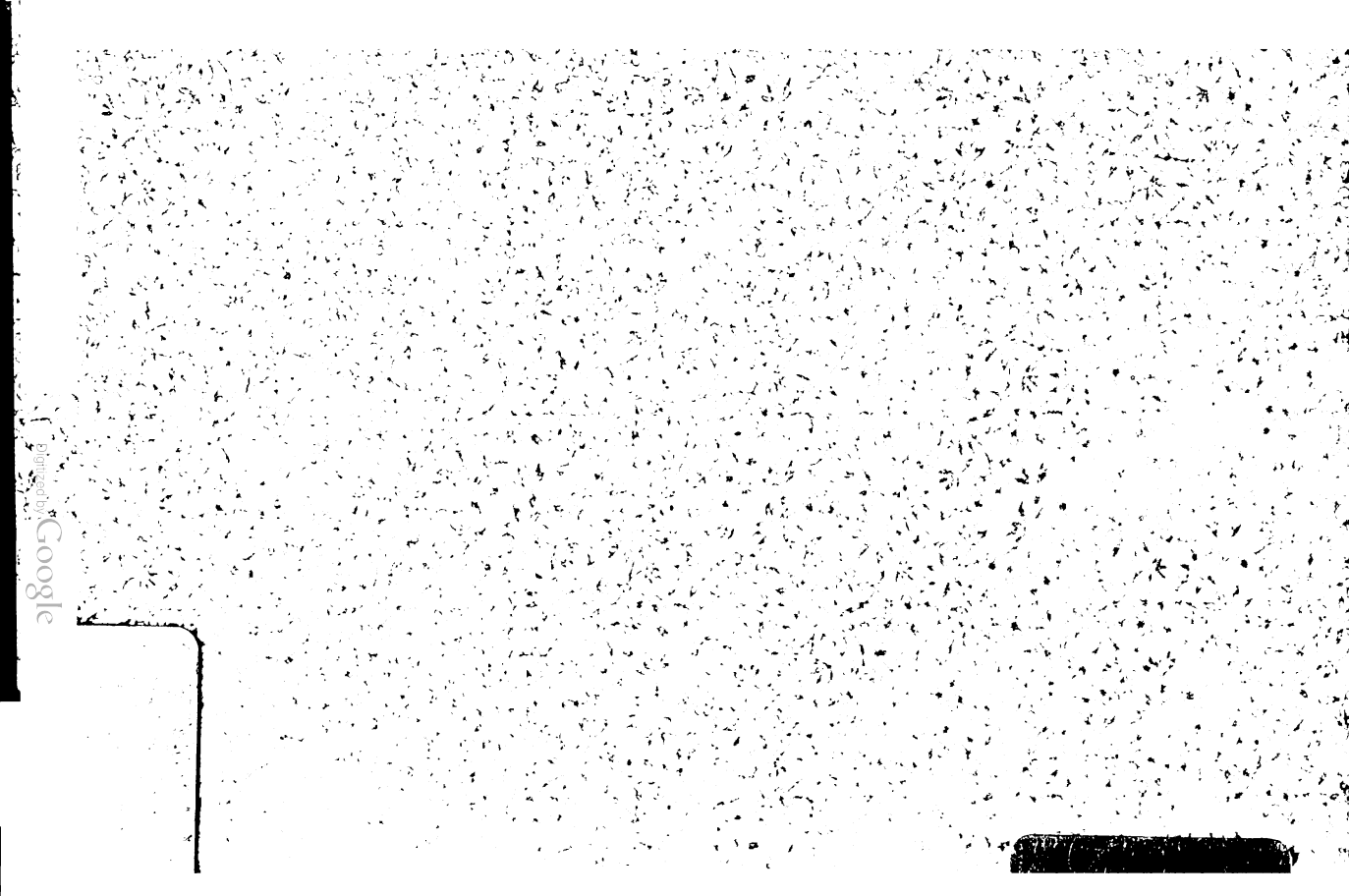
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